

EXTRACTION



A Derrick Olin Novel

by,

Stellen Qxz

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Also by Stellen Qxz:

Principal Target
Compulsive
Criminal
Inactive
Vicious
Deadline

For Dad.

and

For Edward Vaughn Howell (March 1964–Sept.
1996)
—Friend and fellow warrior now gone.

*“Here’s to us and those like us, damn few, and most of
them are dead.”¹*

¹ Sgt. Maj. Thurgood “Goody” Nelson, from the movie *Gardens of Stone*.

Chapter 1

So here I was again, sitting in a parked car in the middle of the night waiting for something to happen. As I had often mused in situations such as this, I did a lot of sitting in cars and waiting during the course of my life and work. By now I was pretty good at it. Nonetheless, I still hated it. This was the third night of my vigil. A Friday night at the end of the first week of March. The weather this week had been mild by late winter standards in Birmingham, low seventies during the day and mid forties at night. Tonight it was forty-four degrees. Actually it was this morning because right now it was a few minutes before three a.m. So really it was Saturday morning instead of Friday night. If nothing happened I'd probably pack it in around seven or eight, and maybe try again Saturday night. That was the problem when dealing with stalkers. They never gave you advance warning of their actions so you could better plan your life.

Inconsiderate bastards, the lot of them.

A few days ago I had been at home reading through a very old book of translated works by Nietzsche. It had been years since I had read any of his stuff and I'm not quite sure why I was trying it again. I was looking at books in a used bookstore last week and came across this large volume of his that was only fifty-nine cents. Who could pass that up? So I bought it. After a few pages I began to wonder if perhaps I had overpaid.

Some said Nietzsche was nuts for most of his life and others believe he lost his marbles only near the end. I've often been on the fence about this and have really never cared, but now I'm starting to rethink a bit and am closer to the side that thinks he was nuts for most of his life. The book's about a thousand pages long and I really wasn't sure that I would make it through the whole thing without going around the bend myself. Luckily, by page thirty-seven, I received a call from someone who was in need of my services. Or rather the call was from someone who *knew* someone who was in need of my services.

Reverend Tom Boone was the pastor of Saint Paul's Lutheran Church over on Sixth Avenue South in Birmingham. At present he is sixty-four years old with a full gray beard and a matching head of unruly hair. When I had first met him he was clean shaven and had a full head of neatly trimmed jet black hair. This had been more than thirty years ago and I myself had a full head of jet black hair back then. And I was about eight.

Tom Boone had been only the second minister of Saint Paul's in my lifetime, and at present he didn't show any signs of being ready to retire. He was still vital and all of his parishioners looked to him for guidance and help when their lives weren't going well. He was a man with a mission and truly believed in what he did, his work was everything, as were his family and his flock.

When I was a kid I had attended Saint Paul's with my parents because it was the family church and that's what kids did. However, as I began to grow up I pulled away from the church and have never looked back. For me there is nothing in religion. I have nothing against those who believe, those who preach and pray, but it means nothing to me; and I'm quite comfortable with that.

Over the years Tom has tried to reach out to me and get me to come back to the church. He is never brash or a bully, he never attempts the *fire and brimstone* routine, he simply talks to me and tells me what his faith means to him and how he has seen the power of religion and spirituality lift people up in their lives. I listen sometimes, I actually like Tom, but he has never swayed me, and he never will. Although I know he will never give up on me, I believe that some part of him has come to realize that he will never succeed with me either. Even so, he and I have some great talks from time to time. And also, from time to time, when the occasion has arisen, he has directed a client or two my way. As was the case a few days ago when Tom called and asked me to come over to his office at the church.

Felicity Lowe is a thirty-five year old divorced mother of two. She works as a personal secretary at an office downtown and lives in a modest house in the Roebuck area on the east side of Birmingham. A month and a half ago she ended a five month relationship with a gentleman by the name of Tommy Beale, a salesman at Jim Skinner Ford in Center Point. However, Mr. Beale was not ready for this relationship to end and he kept coming by Felic-

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ity's house and even met her when she came out of work a few times, trying to talk to her, despite her firm statements to him that he should not continue do this. When Beale ignored her and kept coming by, Felicity contacted an attorney and had a restraining order issued against him.

This order worked for about a week once it was served. Which, unfortunately, is the case in a lot of these situations. Beale continued to come by her house, but only late at night when no one else saw him. A couple of times he slashed the tires on her car in the driveway and once he even broke into her home and trashed it when she and her kids were out. Felicity called the police and they came and took reports, but since no one actually saw who had done the break-in and the vandalism, there was little the police could do. Which, unfortunately once more, is usually the case in such situations.

Luckily for Felicity Lowe her mother is friends with Julia Boone, Tom's wife. She told Tom about the problem and asked if he could recommend someone who could help. That's when Tom called me. He and I met and then a meeting was arranged with Felicity a few hours later. She explained the situation to me and as she spoke I realized that I was looking at someone who was on the verge of losing it, someone who was frightened to death for herself as well as her kids. Someone who really needed help. I was also reasonably sure that she couldn't afford to pay my usual fee for the kind of service she would obviously require. It's a good thing I'm a nice guy sometimes. Or perhaps just a sucker for a damsel in distress.

I agreed to take her case, and so here I am, once again sitting in a parked car waiting for something to happen. At three o'clock in the *fucking* morning!

I covered my mouth as I started to yawn, shifting in the front seat of my 1996 dark blue Ford Taurus. There was no way that I was going to get comfortable after this many hours of sitting, but I really didn't want to get too comfortable, if I did something might get missed.

Felicity Lowe's house was toward the north end of Park Place off of Roebuck Drive. The street was narrow and there wasn't a whole lot of cover where you could park and be unobtrusive. This was the kind of neighborhood where somebody sitting out in a parked car for too long would get noticed and a call would be placed to the cops. And for this reason I had asked Felicity if

she was close to anybody in the neighborhood and she had given me several names.

A house down the street and across from hers belonged to a couple on that list. I went and had a talk with the owners after my client called them and explained what I was going to be doing for her for the next few days. They sat and listened solemnly, wanting to do whatever they could to help. They were a retired couple with no children of their own in the area and had come to look upon Felicity and her children as an extension of their family after they moved into the neighborhood a couple of years earlier. They were genuinely distressed when they learned what Felicity was going through. This worked out well for me because they were willing to help without question or hesitation.

Since their house was almost at the dead end of the street and it was not really well lit by streetlamps at night, their side driveway made the perfect surveillance post for me, especially when they parked their station wagon at the front of the drive and blocked my Taurus from view of the south end of the street. I had a good pair of binoculars and could adjust them to see the area around Felicity's house—which *was* well lit by streetlamps—with no problems. Cars came and went for most of the early part of the night and then began to taper off after eleven. There were usually no pedestrians out past nine in this neighborhood and anybody on foot would bring immediate suspicion. These facts kind of made me wonder just how it was possible that Tommy Beale had managed to get into Felicity's house unseen on multiple occasions. Maybe he had been a ninja in another life.

Or maybe he was just lucky.

No police cars patrolled this street either. Ordinarily after a restraining order was issued—especially once there was evidence that it was being violated—the local precinct would increase patrols in the vicinity. However, once I took the job I had a talk with a friend of mine in the East Precinct and asked him to have the patrols pulled. Beale wasn't likely to make a move if he saw cop cars and that might make things drag on for a while longer than they needed to. Whether I'm getting paid or not I don't like to sit and wait forever. I'm a short-term guy, get in and get the job done, then get out. If Tommy Beale was still harassing his ex-girlfriend, then I wanted him to come sooner rather than later, and then this would be over and done with.

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But this might not be the night either. So I guess my weekend is shot.

Oh well, Nietzsche will just have to wait a while longer.

What a shame.

I was reaching for my half-consumed bottle of water when a slow-moving dark colored pickup truck caught my attention. Actually what really caught my attention was the fact that the pickup was driving slowly down Park Place without headlights on at three in the morning. Curious indeed.

I put the water bottle back on the seat and picked up my binoculars.

A Ford F-150.

Tommy Beale drives a Ford F-150, dark green.

Coincidence? I think not.

Maybe my weekend plans just improved, I thought, pressing the send button on the communicator attached to my throat.

"We may be in business," I spoke plainly. "There's a pickup that fits the suspect's vehicle description moving slow past the target house and about to take the left on Lilac. May just be passing through or casing the place. Let me know if he stops back there somewhere."

A moment later I received a quick reply.

Suddenly I felt a familiar feeling in the pit of my stomach and smiled soberly.

Yeah, *action stations*.

Or as Holmes would have put it: *The game's afoot!*

Chapter 2

About a year ago I had started training some of the brighter members of a local security firm in the techniques of high-risk security and close-protection services. In addition to the course and classroom work, I also take some of my trainees into the field on occasion to lend assistance and to get some *real-world* experience. For my assignment on behalf of Felicity Lowe I had been using them all week. Tonight my partner was a thirty-one year old ex-Air Force Security Forces NCO named Ed Monroe. Being ex-Air Force myself I kind of took a liking to the young man right off. The fact that he was bright, attentive, and not much of a talker helped a lot in that direction.

Two minutes after I'd signaled him about the possible arrival of Tommy Beale in the area, Ed was back on the radio telling me that the truck had pulled to a stop on Lilac Drive just to the west of Catherine Street where Ed was holding position and keeping an eye on the back of Felicity Lowe's house. I asked if anyone got out of the truck and he told me no, so I had him sit still and continue to watch.

I decided to climb out of my car and stretch my legs in the darkness and loosen everything up just in case I had to spring into action in a bit. I'm in pretty good shape for a man in his early forties, but sitting cramped up in a small space for several hours does take its toll after a while.

Leaning backwards and arching to relieve the dull ache in the center of my back, I glanced up at the moonless sky and sighed a little. A few seconds later I stood erect once more, reaching under my black windbreaker and digging my fingers into the flesh above my belt, trying to rub out some of the stiffness.

"Somebody's getting out of the truck," Ed Monroe's voice sounded in my earpiece. *"Dressed in black, wearing a mask, can't make out race or gender. They're heading toward the yard of the house next door to the client's. I'm gonna lose sight of him in a second."*

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A total calm came over me in that instant as I reached for the send button.

“Move!” I ordered, and then stepped out past the station wagon, glancing down and across the street. I couldn’t see anything at the moment, but in my gut I felt plenty.

Alright, I thought silently, taking a breath and releasing it. Let’s do this.

Quickly and silently I crossed the street and ran down toward my client’s house.

Chapter 3

There were no fences around the houses in this neighborhood. I suppose they didn't subscribe to that adage about good fences making good neighbors. Unfortunately this made it easier for someone to get to one of the houses from the street. And as Ed Monroe had indicated, the person who had exited the dark green Ford F-150 now parked down on Lilac Drive had run across the street and into the backyard of the house next to Felicity Lowe's. The lighting on the back side of the houses was not all that good, although Felicity did have a weak bulb installed over her backdoor and it gave off some minimal illumination, just not that much.

I ran down to the front of 964 Park Lane, my client's house, and stopped in the driveway behind her white Toyota Camry, kneeling down by the back bumper and looking down between the houses toward the back. Nothing.

I waited another heartbeat then moved into a crouch and started down along the car's driver's side toward the side of the house. Halfway down the distance I heard sounds of a scuffle and paused a moment, then continued forward at a quickened pace.

When I cleared the side of the house the weak light from the bulb over the backdoor made it just possible to discern two dark-clad individuals shoving and growling at each other. The one on the left I recognized immediately because he was not wearing a mask. Ed Monroe. He had just blocked a roundhouse kick to his head and shot back with a punch to his opponent's midsection, which the opponent managed to jump back and avoid.

Now the two men circled each other, hands raised at the ready, obviously both of them having received instruction in the martial arts. I knew this was true about Ed because of his Air Force background, but I didn't know if Tommy Beale had any experience in that field. Felicity said she did not believe he had military experience, but then she hadn't known he would turn out to be a stalker either. On the other hand, this masked figure might not actu-

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ally be Tommy Beale. Being masked made it kind of hard to tell; which was the point.

Ed struck out with another punch and it was blocked as well, and this time his attacker moved in close and delivered a sharp left to Ed's gut. The impact was solid and Ed doubled up, reaching out and grabbing his opponent's right shoulder with his left hand for balance. A mistake because this kept him close to the hostile, and the hostile took advantage of this, raising his knee into Ed's crotch.

Rookie mistake. I had more work to do with this kid. But not at the moment.

Ed went down on knees, holding both his stomach and his groin. The masked attacker raised both gloved hands above his head and locked his fingers together, preparing to strike with devastating brutality.

I hit his ribcage on the left side with my shoulder after launching into the air from ten feet away, the impact carrying both of us to the grass several feet away from Ed as he continued to try to recover from his injuries. When we landed on the ground I quickly rolled away and came back up to my feet, turning to face my opponent. He wasn't as quick, and he was hurt, and had only made it to one knee.

There's no such thing as fair-play in the real world and I didn't feel the need to wait for the other guy to get to his feet before attacking. Moving in swiftly, I raised my left foot and drove the heel of my black Hi-Tech boot into the center of the masked attacker's chest, driving him back to the ground with a cracked sternum. That should take the fight out of him for a while.

I was breathing a little heavily at that point and almost didn't hear the other one move in from my left, swinging what appeared to be a tire-iron at my head.

Dropping just in time, it went over my head with maybe a quarter inch to spare, and I spun in the opposite direction all the way back around to face this new threat. Now I was looking into the face of a man I recognized from a photo my client had shown me. *Tommy Beale*. So that answered the question about martial arts experience. Tommy had a friend.

Of course, at the moment, Tommy's friend didn't really concern me, Tommy's tire-iron did.

He moved in once more and jabbed at me wildly and I circled out of the way, keeping my hands low but ready. Looking at him now, I saw that Tommy Beale pretty much resembled the picture I had seen. About my height, kind of dumpy looking, wide face, his brown hair starting to march backwards on his long forehead. And there was a kind of meanness around his mouth, a cruelty that was easy for me to recognize. A pity Felicity hadn't noticed it earlier. Perhaps it would have saved her a lot of heartache.

This time when Tommy came at me I didn't move, just stood still and let him come, and when he swung I reached out and caught the wrist of the arm with the tire-iron, stepping in close and driving my right fist hard into his exposed belly, twisting upward on contact, knocking the wind out of him and doubling him over. As he dropped forward he met my knee on the way down and his nose cracked, blood spewing freely. The tire-iron dropped from his hand and he sank to the ground clutching his face, falling on his left side and whimpering awfully.

Glancing back over my shoulder I saw that Ed Monroe was now on his feet, one hand on his stomach and the other holding a Ruger 9mm pistol aimed at the man still wearing the mask and lying unmoving on the ground.

"You okay?" I said.

"Yeah," he said. "My pride hurts the most. I fucked up."

"It happens," I said. "And since you survived this you get to make it better next time. Watch them both. I'm gonna call the cops and then check on our client."

He nodded and moved to a center position where he could watch both men as I stepped back around toward the driveway and headed for the front of the house, taking my cell phone off of my belt.

I didn't bother calling the local precinct or 9-11, instead I called the morning shift patrol supervisor for this sector on his personal cell phone and told him what had happened.

Someone once said that it was all in *who you knew*. I guess they were right.

My call was answered after three rings and a minute after I hung up I heard sirens rapidly approaching my location.

Chapter 4

By five a.m. most people were wide awake on Park Place in Roebuck, many out on their front porches and lawns in their bathrobes and slippers watching the activity taking place at the home of Felicity Lowe. There were about ten police cars parked around the house as well, front and back, and nearly twice as many officers, included among them the sector patrol supervisor, Sergeant Curtis Willis.

Curtis is fifty-seven, black, gray and balding, and has a bit of a gut these days, but he is still one of the best and toughest cops I know. I was glad this was his precinct, and I was glad he was on scene now.

Within just a few minutes of my call to Curtis, officers were at the house and taking Tommy Beale and his masked associate into custody, the mask now removed and his identity being revealed as Kurt Fuller, another salesman and buddy of Beale's from Jim Skinner. I guess Mr. Skinner was going to be looking for some more sales-force help in a little while.

Curtis was in the third car to arrive and as soon as he took charge a perimeter was established and officers were assigned to make sure no one entered or left the area until the police investigation had been completed.

I was in the house with my client when Curtis knocked on the door and I let him in. Felicity and I were in the living room on the sofa and Curtis came in and joined us, removing his cap and setting it on the end table near the entryway. Felicity was wearing a pink bathrobe and matching fuzzy slippers and her face was pale as a sheet. She had been terrified to learn that Tommy Beale had indeed shown up once again and this time had brought someone with him. I had done my best to assure her that she was safe now, and that Mr. Beale would not be troubling her any further. Still, she was shaken, realizing how close she had come to having something very unpleasant happen to her.

The silver lining was the fact that she had asked her mother to keep her kids this weekend and they were not around for everything that was going on now.

Curtis stood in the middle of the room with his notepad and ink pen and asked his questions while Felicity and I sat on the sofa and she answered him, as did I. I had a hand on her arm for support and at one point she turned into me and put her head on my shoulder. I slipped my arm around her shoulders and held her for a while, continuing to answer Curtis' questions.

A female officer came in when Curtis and I stepped out and she stayed with Felicity while we went and found Ed Monroe still in the backyard, and the questioning continued. The three of us had walked back around to the front of the house just after five o'clock when we saw a car stopped at the south end of the perimeter, a young officer leaning down toward the driver's window talking to the occupant. The officer stood up after a minute and leaned his head to the left as he pressed the transmit button on the radio mike attached to his epaulet.

"Sarge, I got a guy down here claims he's a minister. Actually I got his ID, he is a minister. Reverend Thomas Boone. Says the lady in the house called him and he wants to come up."

I glanced at Curtis.

"He's okay, Curtis," I told him. "Tom Boone is the guy who got me in this. She probably wants to see him."

Curtis nodded and told the officer to let Pastor Boone through, which he did, and a minute later Tom Boone climbed out of his ten year old Dodge wearing his black preacher's outfit and a thick gray sweater, his hair uncombed and sleep still evident in his tired eyes.

I walked over to him and we shook hands.

"Derrick," he said in a strong voice. "Felicity called me and told me that something had happened. I told her I'd come right over. Is she okay?"

"Sure, Pastor," I said. "She's fine. Physically. Shaken up though. She was never in any direct danger. We stopped them outside the house. But the thought of what could have happened has taken hold of her."

"*Them?*" the reverend said with a raised left eyebrow.

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"Yeah," I said. "Them. Her ex brought a friend. Cops have both of them in custody. Plus they got a little banged up during the course of their apprehension."

Despite himself Tom Boone grinned.

"And did you have anything to do with them getting *banged* up, Derrick?"

I grinned too, suddenly feeling very tired.

"All in a day's work, Reverend," I said. "She's in the living room with a female officer. The kids are at her mother's. Go on in, I'm sure she'll be glad you're here."

Reverend Boone stared at me for another few seconds, then reached out with both hands and squeezed my shoulders.

"God bless you, Derrick Olin," he said sternly. "Whether you believe in *him* or not."

I smiled and touched his right arm.

Another couple of seconds and he went into the house.

"Where are they now?" I said to Curtis Willis as I turned back toward him.

"Down at UAB," he said, adjusting his cap and glancing around. "You fucked those boys up pretty good, Derrick. Not that they didn't deserve it. And one did have a tire-iron in his hands. They gonna be in the jail ward for a few days. We got Beale's ass though for sure. He wasn't supposed to come within five hundred yards of this place and you got him in the backyard. And he had a weapon when he attacked you. Add to that the conspiracy with Fuller and we got a mess of charges to hand the DA. He gon' be gone for some years. Your girl in there'll be rid of him now."

I nodded, then reached up to cover my mouth as I yawned.

"Good," I said eventually. "Idiot would have been better off had he just gone and found another girlfriend."

Curtis Willis chuckled and reached back and rested his hand on top of the grip of his holstered revolver.

"Well now he gonna find himself a boyfriend where he goin'."

I nodded, glancing over at Ed Monroe.

"Oh well... sucks to be him. Thanks for your help, Curtis."

“No sweat, Derrick. Glad to get this fool off the streets. One less headache in my precinct.”

We spoke for a few minutes more and then Sergeant Willis went to talk to a couple of his officers at the back of the house. Ed Monroe came up to me after that, an uncertain expression on his face.

“You did well tonight, Ed,” I told him. “And I’m not bullshitting you. You survived, that’s what counts. I’ve been knocked on my ass plenty over the years. It’ll happen to you again as well.”

He didn’t say anything for a minute, and then nodded slowly, yawning.

“Yeah, thanks, Derrick. For the opportunity and the ass-save back there.”

I put out my hand and we shook.

“Any time. Now why don’t you take off. You’re done for the night. Actually for the morning, considering the time. I’ll call Masters later this morning and let him know the detail’s done. You get credit for the whole night. Hell, you earned it.”

Ed Monroe looked at me silently once more for about half a minute, then nodded his head and turned, moving off toward the back where his car was parked on the opposite street.

The sun started coming up about a quarter to six and most of the officers started to depart. In a while only Curtis Willis remained and he told me he had to get back to the station and complete the paperwork before shift change. We shook hands and he said he’d be in touch.

After watching the patrol supervisor’s car pull out and turn down Lilac Drive, I went back into Felicity Lowe’s house and found her still seated on the sofa, Tom Boone sitting beside her, holding her gently and telling her that everything was going to be alright.

Strange that at this moment I should suddenly realize just how cute Felicity Lowe was, even when she was as distraught as she appeared now.

Derrick Olin, what an absolute pervert you are.

I had to fight very hard not to smile as I moved back into the room.

And also not to stare too hard at my now ex-client.

Damsels in distress, they do it to me every time.

Chapter 5

I've been a great fan of Chinese food since college and I could eat it everyday, but I don't. Usually at least once a week, maybe twice. However, not until a recent trip out to San Francisco did I try Thai food. I found that I liked it as well, although some of it was a bit too spicy for my tastes.

A few months ago somebody opened a Thai place over in Mountain Brook called *Surin of Thailand*, advertising authentic Thai cooking. I had wanted to give it a try for a while and Monday night I finally got the opportunity, a celebratory occasion as it turned out.

Another top cop in Birmingham—at least according to my rankings—is a detective with the department's Criminal Intelligence Unit. Her name is Paige Palmer and I've known her since she was still in uniform and working a beat in North Precinct. Her first assignment as a detective had been five grueling years in Vice-Narcotics. During her time there she'd been stabbed twice, nearly shot three times, and made more arrests than any other street detective assigned to her squad. When the department created its first ever full-time intelligence unit eighteen months ago Paige was among the first detectives reassigned; and over the last year and a half Detective Palmer has become a rising star. Which is why I had something to celebrate this Monday night, as did Paige.

I held up a glass of champagne and touched it to the one that Paige held across the table from me.

"And here's to the newest lead detective of the Criminal Intelligence Unit of the Birmingham Police Department," I said in a serious voice. "And the sexiest."

Paige grinned widely, her brown eyes shimmering in the low light around our booth in the back of Surin's.

"Why thank you, sir," she said, her voice husky and sensual. "I am but a humble civil servant of the public, proud to do her duty for the good citizens of our fair city."

We both grinned as we drank. Ordinarily I don't drink alcohol of any kind, but on special occasions I make minor exceptions. And Paige was more than a minor exception.

"Really, baby," I said, setting my glass back on the table in front of me. "Congratulations. You really deserve it."

She reached across the table with her left hand and rested it on top of mine.

"Thanks. I'm not gonna lie, I was really surprised when the captain and lieutenant called me in today and told me. I thought for sure I was about to get written up for something. Then they hit me with this. I damn near fainted."

I chuckled and squeezed her hand.

"Nah, babe, they know how good you are. You've got eighteen years in now. You deserve this. And I'm proud of you."

Paige beamed at me and ran her finger across the back of my hand.

"Well I know I'm glad for the raise. An eight grand bump. I can use that. Still got my two youngest in college and even though they have jobs I still have to help them from time to time. God knows their father won't. But that's another subject and one I don't want to think about now. We're here to celebrate *me!*"

"Yes, we are," I said, reaching for the champagne bottle in the ice bucket once more, refilling her glass. "And I intend to thoroughly *celebrate* you this evening. Drink up."

And she did. I finished my one glass and then switched to water.

We ordered dinner and continued our celebration, keeping an eye on the time because at eight o'clock we were supposed to be at the Brock Recital Hall on the campus of Samford University. Tonight they were sponsoring a Bach concert that I had been looking forward to for months, the *Brandenburg Concertos*, my all-time favorites.

Halfway through dinner Paige got up and moved around to my side of the table and pressed herself against me, her champagne breath warm on my face. She kissed me with her eyes open and her hand on my thigh.

"After the concert we're going back to your place so I can strip you naked and suck your dick till you come," she whispered in a quiet, direct tone.

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I laughed and felt her hand edging up my thigh, seeing the seriousness peeking through the mirth in her eyes; and I also felt the stirrings of my tumescence.

Of course.

Also known as the *Paige Palmer Effect*.

I kissed her lips, staring directly into her eyes.

“Sounds like a nice beginning,” I told her. “And I’ve got the perfect *ending* in mind.”

Paige grinned and put her arms around my neck.

“Can’t wait,” she said, kissing me again.

For the rest of the meal she remained on my side of the table and her hand stayed where it was. It made getting up afterwards a little awkward, but I am a man of will.

And besides, did I really care if everybody around knew my date gave me a hard-on?

Chapter 6

Paige is in her mid-forties, but has the stamina and drive of a woman half her age... and mine. Nonetheless, I am no quitter, and no matter how exhausted I became that Monday night into Tuesday morning, I was bound and determined not to be the first to cry *uncle*. Crying something else was another matter, however.

"Oh yeah baby!" Paige yelled, then moaned deeply as she arched her back. *"Yeah, like that! Like that! Yeah! Yeah! Give it to me! Fuck me! That's it! Yeah! Yeah! Yeahhhhhhhh!"*

"Oh yeah!" I growled, feeling the intense beating of my racing heart. *"Yeah! Oh fuck! Goddamn! Fuck! Fuck! Goddamn, baby! Fuck, Paige! Goddamn! Yeah! Fuck! Fuckkkkkkk!"*

I'm not sure which one of us finished first. Screaming or coming. Suddenly I just realized that it was quiet, except for our mutual heavy breathing. I suppose I was still alive, I could feel every part of my body, and my heart was beating fast, about to burst through my chest. It hadn't yet exploded though. That was a good sign I suppose.

Beneath me Paige turned her head to the left, her dark blond hair wet and plastered to the side of her face. Her mouth was open but her eyes were closed. She tried to raise her head off the pillow beneath her but the effort was too much and she gave up.

I leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"Think somebody called the cops?" I said.

Paige half grinned and opened her eyes.

"If they did I'll just tell 'em that a *lead* detective was getting her rocks off in here and they should go mind their own business."

I chuckled and kissed her again.

"That should do it," I said.

Paige exhaled loudly and lifted her head once more, this time successfully.

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“Jesus Christ that is exactly what I needed, Derrick. All of it. The dinner, the concert, and surely this. *Especially* this.”

I kissed her naked shoulder and then nibbled her neck.

“Makes two of us, love. Thanks for the night.”

Paige grinned, glancing back at me over her left shoulder.

“I think that’s my line, Mr. Olin. But you’re welcome anyway. And oh god I can still feel you inside me.”

Chuckling, I kissed her shoulder again.

“That’s because I am still inside you, dear-heart,” I told her.

“I know that,” Paige said, squirming around beneath me. “That’s what I mean. You feel so good in me.”

I kissed her once more, pressing my whole naked body against hers.

“And you feel so good too. Really good.”

We continued to lay like that for maybe five more minutes and then I pushed up with both arms and withdrew from Paige, rolling over and sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Paige sat up a few moments later and leaned against my right arm, putting her head on my shoulder.

“You know how many times my ex tried to get me to let him do that to me and I wouldn’t? And we were together twenty years. Now here I am with you and every time we get together we seem to end up doing it.”

I put my arm around her shoulders and squeezed her.

“Lucky me,” I told her.

She grinned.

“Lucky *me*,” she said.

I kissed her cheek and stood up, carefully unrolling the condom from my retracting organ. Paige stood too and walked around the bed and over toward the bathroom door in the corner. I watched her as she moved, my eyes inevitably dropping down to that incredibly shaped butt of hers, the memories of our most recent anal adventures replaying in my mind.

Suddenly a thin smile crossed my lips, and I also realized that I was becoming hard again. So much for all that nonsense about guys over forty needing an hour’s rest before they could restart.

Or Viagra for that matter.

Only *all-natural* nature involved here.

Stellen Qxz

Paige was leaning over the sink in the bathroom splashing cold water on her face when I walked in behind her and shut the door. She looked up in the mirror above the sink and smiled at me. When she saw the expression in my eyes hers became incredulous.

“You’re *not* serious?” she said.

Then she *felt* me.

Question answered.

Chapter 7

I was giving Mr. Nietzsche another try, and regretting it fully. I was up to page fifty-two now and having trouble staying awake as I lay on the sofa in my living room and tried to read. I like to finish what I start but life is only so long and by the time I actually get to the end of this particular work I will, in all probability, have been dead for several decades.

It was Wednesday, mid-March, mild temperatures but raining at the moment. The perfect day to spend inside with a good book. Unfortunately I didn't have a good book to spend the day inside with. I was beginning to miss my stakeout at Felicity Lowe's place.

A quick check of my watch told me that it was barely nine in the morning. I had already worked out for the day, showered, dressed, and eaten, and since there was no work currently on the radar, I didn't have much else to do but read. Maybe I should get up and go over to the Books-A-Million a couple miles away in the Wildwood Shopping Center and get something better, perhaps a novel by Robert B. Parker or Jack Higgins. Well maybe not Mr. Higgins. Over the past few years he's become a bit too repetitive for me, but Mr. Parker is still as fresh as ever. It might be good to get out for a while, although I could do without spending a great deal of money right now, seeing as how I didn't really have any coming in.

I got up off the sofa and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water, leaning back against the sink as I drank it and contemplated the rest of my day. Would I remain with Nietzsche, or go and get something else? Perhaps I could just go into the bedroom and take out all my guns, break them down and clean them. That was always fun. And in a couple hours I'd have nothing to do again. Besides, on Monday I had gone over to the range and used four of them and they were already clean and in order. And to be honest, all of my other weapons were in similar condition. No, doing that would simply be a waste of time.

Maybe I should give Nietzsche another try. Hell, maybe I'd fall asleep and the day would just drift away.

Maybe.

I'd been on the sofa for ten minutes when my cell phone rang. I have never been so glad to be interrupted by a phone call in all of my life.

"Hello?" I said.

"Derrick, it's me."

George Oliver. Ollie to his friends—and many of his enemies; those few who were still alive.

"Yeah, Ollie," I said, dropping the book on the coffee table and sitting up. "What's up?"

"You doing anything right now?" he said directly.

"Does sitting on the sofa with a lousy book count?" I responded.

"No," he said. "It don't. I could use your help with something if you got the time."

"I've got the time," I told him, suddenly curious. Ollie was not known to ask for a lot of help. Actually I'm not sure I ever heard him ask before. "What do you need?"

"Need you to come over to Midfield first off," he said. "When you get here I'll explain. Can you come soon?"

"Sure," I told him. "Depending on where in Midfield, I can be there in about a half hour, give or take."

"You know where Pinewood Avenue is?"

"No," I said. "But I got a map and a GPS. I can find it. Got an address."

He gave it to me.

"Got it," I said, dropping my feet to the floor. "I'll shoot for a half hour."

"Thanks," Ollie said quietly, a hint of distraction in his voice before he continued. "And, Derrick..."

"Yeah, Ollie."

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem," I said. "See you in a bit."

Extraction

I stood and pressed the END button on my phone, stepping around the coffee table and walking down the hall to the bedroom to get my jacket and a few other *items* before heading out.

Chapter 8

A quick glance at a city map told me that I could find Pinewood Avenue in Midfield pretty easily. In fact, I already knew where it was and how to get there, no need for a GPS fix. It was ten-thirty when I left my apartment in Homewood, heading north down Green Springs Highway and taking a left at Green Springs Avenue. I could have gotten on the interstate but chose not to. Midfield wasn't all that far away and there was actually a more direct route if you skipped the interstate.

Green Springs leads into Dennison and then Dennison takes you to Jefferson, which in short order becomes Alameda, Cleburn, Brighton, and finally Woodward. With all those name changes you'd think you were really going some place. In actuality you were traveling about seven miles between Homewood, Birmingham, Fairfield and the small western side municipality known as Midfield. The rain let up a short while after I got into my car and by the time I took the right from Woodward Road onto Parkwood Street it had nearly stopped completely, leaving behind only a slight mist that was more of an annoyance than any real obstacle.

The next left was Pinewood and I took it, slowing down and looking at the house numbers, finding the one I was looking for—292—on the left hand side. Parked in the left side drive was Ollie's black Caddy SUV glistening in the rain's aftermath. I knew this was not where he lived and was a little curious to find out what his connection was to this place, and precisely what it was he needed help with.

I kept on going past the house, glancing at all the others, then U-turned at the corner and came back, parking in front of #292 and shutting off my car. Behind Ollie's Caddy was a little red sports car that I had seen parked on the back lot at Club-Dexter from time to time, although I had never bothered to find out who it belonged to. I suppose I would find out soon enough.

I climbed out of my Taurus, glanced around the street casually, then turned toward the house and started up the walk, stopping on the front porch

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and reaching for the bell. The front door opened just before I pushed and Ollie stood there wearing a dark green long sleeve shirt and dark trousers. His afro and goatee were neatly trimmed as always and his gold framed glasses were in place over his serious brown eyes.

“Hey, Ollie,” I said.

He reached and pushed open the screen door and held it for me. I stepped inside and he shut both doors behind me.

The room I entered was very feminine, and nicely furnished. I didn’t know too much about expensive furniture because it had never mattered to me. All of the places I had ever lived since leaving my parent’s house were pre-furnished. But I knew plush when I saw it. I also knew there was no way Ollie lived here, or spent that much time here.

“Come on in and take a seat,” he said, moving around me into the living room. “Place is kind of girly but what would you expect from a girl? You want something to drink?”

“Nah,” I said, going over to an armchair on the front wall with a window to its left. “I’m fine.”

I sat and Ollie stood for a few moments, adjusting his glasses, not looking at me. Then he sighed, moved over and sat down on the large fluffy sofa across from where I sat, a low glass coffee table in front of it, crossing his long legs.

“Guess you really wondering why I called you over here, huh?”

I nodded.

“Yeah. But I figure you’ll get around to telling me when you’re ready.”

Ollie gave a half smile.

“Yeah,” he said, then turned his head and glanced down the long hall to his right.

More silence followed and I glanced around, saw some photos on the wall and on the mantel above the fireplace. Didn’t recognize anybody in any of them, however, a couple of them showed a familiar resemblance. Now I was very curious. I glanced at Ollie but he didn’t say anything, and turned to glance back down the hall once more.

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me one thing.”

He turned back toward me.

“Yeah?”

“This place belongs to your head hostess?”

Ollie sat rock-still for several seconds before cracking a small smile.

“What make you ask that?” he said.

“A couple of those pictures up there over the mantel,” I told him.

“Two of the women favor her. One is probably her mother, the other a sister.”

Ollie’s smile grew larger.

“Guess you wasn’t such a bad investigator when you was in the Air Force,” he said. “Yeah, this her place. And it’s because of her that I’m here right now, and you too, kind of. It’s her problem, really a friend of hers. She need help with it. More your kind of help. So I called you.”

“Okay,” I said. “And I assume you mean she needs some security work done and not...”

Ollie laughed despite himself, removing his glasses to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand, and then putting them back on.

“God, Derrick, you do think a lot of yourself. ‘Course the girl need security help. You think I brought you over here ‘cause she need help in the *love* department?”

I chuckled.

“Well my reputation in this area is quite substantial,” I said. “Word’s bound to have reached her by now.”

Ollie laughed again, and then a door opened down the hall and Reese Tamblyn came out, walking into the front room wearing a snug pair of blue jeans, a clinging white T-shirt that hung outside, and a pair of white sneakers. Her shoulder length blond hair looked recently washed and still a little wet. She stopped next to the sofa where Ollie sat and glanced over at me, a hand on her round hip.

“Derrick,” she said with a smile. “Thank you for coming.”

“No problem,” I told her.

She walked over to where I sat and I stood up.

“I’m serious,” she said, her voice twinged with melancholy. “Thank you.”

Before I could say anything else Reese put her arms around my neck and squeezed me tightly. I put my arms around her and held her close, keep-

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ing my physical reactions firmly in check; and with Reese Tamblyn this is never an easy thing to accomplish.

A couple minutes went by and I was growing more and more uncomfortable. For his part Ollie sat on the sofa and smiled, enjoying my discomfort. I stuck my tongue out for a second and then ignored him.

Finally Reese pulled back, keeping her hands on my shoulders as she stared up into my eyes. There was sadness in her crystal blue eyes, and tears. She definitely had trouble. And this meant I really had to make sure I avoided too much more contact with her 36D's. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to concentrate on what I should be concentrating on.

"What is it?" I said.

She continued to stare. I waited.

She sighed and turned her head to gaze at Ollie for a minute, and then back at me.

"He didn't tell you anything?" she said.

"No," I said. "Just said to come over and then told me you needed help. Actually a friend of yours needed the help. What is it?"

Reese didn't answer right away, just continued looking at me intently. Finally she took a deep breath and told me to sit down on the chair once more. I did, and then she knelt on the floor beside me. All sorts of inappropriate images floated through my mind then, and with great effort I pushed them aside, making sure to maintain full eye-contact.

Reese took my right hand in hers and stared up at me.

"I've got to tell you something first," she said in a very small voice, almost too soft for me to understand clearly. "Something you might not like and it might mean you won't help me. I'll understand if you don't. I won't hold it against you."

"Reese," I said, squeezing her soft hand lightly. "I'll help you regardless. Nothing you can say will change that, believe me. No matter what the problem."

Again she stared in silence, for maybe a minute this time, and then she once again glanced back over at Ollie before continuing.

"You ever wonder what I used to do before I started working at the club?" she said.

"Not really," I said.

“I used to be a *whore*, Derrick,” she said flatly, her eyes never leaving mine. “I used to turn tricks. I didn’t work the streets, but I was a whore nonetheless. I used to *fuck* people for money. I was a call-girl, an escort.”

I didn’t say anything, stared into her eyes for a few moments, briefly glanced over at Ollie, then back down at her, and I smiled.

“And before I started doing what I’m doing now I used to work for the United States government. Trust me, love, you’re a lot further along the road to sainthood than I am. Now is what you used to do for a living actually relevant to this present situation?”

Reese smiled slightly and wiped her left eye with the back of her hand.

“Ollie said you wouldn’t care,” she said, squeezing my hand. “He said it wouldn’t matter to you one bit, and he was right.”

“Why should it?” I said. “Hell, I trust more prostitutes than I do any politicians, and many cops for that matter. What’s the problem, Reese?”

“I’ve got a friend—she’s still in the *life*. We used to work together back when I was still in it. We’ve kept in touch a little over the years. Back in my day we didn’t have a pimp, just worked through a messaging service; paid them twenty percent. It was a good setup because that way the girls didn’t have to scrounge around themselves looking for clients and keeping track of individual appointments. But over time the pimps have moved into the call-girl business in full, forcing the private services out or taking them over directly, taking control of all the girls and making them work for a lot less than they used to. I saw this coming early and got out in time. I knew what was going to happen and I was right; and didn’t want to be a part of any of it. Luckily I found the job at the club. But a lot of other girls weren’t so lucky.”

She paused, I squeezed her hand again and she smiled a little, but sadly.

“Well I’m sure I don’t have to give you a lesson on how organized crime works,” Reese continued, “and pretty soon all the escorts and call-girls in Birmingham were working for pimps just like the streetwalkers. And the pimps had bosses they answered to and this went further and further up. With more fingers in the pie, the girls on the bottom were getting squeezed harder and harder and were having trouble making their bills. Some tried to quit and this didn’t go over well with the pimps. Which led to some vicious

beatings and at least a couple of killings to set examples for other girls. And soon all of the girls realized what they were in to, unfortunately too late though. You know *Sweet Mya Brown*?”

I nodded.

“Runs a high-class escort service,” I told her. “And is the girlfriend of one Innes Redbone, Birmingham’s top thug.”

“Yeah,” Reese said bitterly. “I knew her back when she used to turn tricks over at the Wynfrey. She’s no better than any of us. Just lucked up and got in good with Innes Redbone is all. And that’s how she got to run her operation. Actually she oversees all the prostitution operations for him, but the escort thing is her personal baby, and it makes a hell of a lot of money, at least that’s what I’m given to understand. A lot of out-of-town clients with deep pockets will pay a lot to get to do whatever they want to with beautiful women who can’t say no.”

I nodded.

“Yeah, I know. A while back I came across a couple of Sweet Mya Brown’s girls, one involved with another case of mine.”

“I know,” Reese said. “And that’s one of the reasons I asked Ollie to call you.”

I frowned slightly, and then glanced over at Ollie. His face was expressionless.

“Okay,” I said, once again looking down into Reese’s eyes. “Tell me.”

“Lionel Grayson,”² she said. “He was involved in something to do with a client of yours a year or two back. He’s dead now, probably murdered by some of Innes Redbone’s creeps. Anyway Grayson was at a fancy function one night and so were you, and with him was a young woman whom you later found out was one of Mya Brown’s escorts.”

I nodded, remembering the night in question rather clearly, and the woman.

“Yeah. Her name was Nina if I remember correctly. Tall blonde, early thirties.”

Reese nodded.

² See *Criminal* by Stellen Qxz

“Nina Neetor,” she said. “Nina’s my friend, Derrick. And she needs help. She needs it badly.”

Okay, I thought. This was starting to get real interesting.

“Alright,” I said out loud. “Where is she, maybe we can talk and work something out?”

Reese nodded and pushed up from the floor, releasing my hand.

“She’s in my bedroom down the hall. I’ll go get her. Please wait here.”

She turned and walked off and I ignored the chance to stare after her shapely backside—first time that’s ever happened—and turned instead toward Ollie, still sitting motionless with no expression whatsoever on his light brown face.

“If I remember correctly, Mr. Oliver, you helped me out quite substantially on that Lionel Grayson thing.”

Ollie nodded slightly, brushing a piece of lint off his trousers.

“Yeah,” he said. “And now you know why I thought of you when this came up.”

I nodded.

Payback.

Quite the bitch indeed.

The door to the back bedroom opened once more and I stood, and so did Ollie.

Reese came back into the living room, and with her came the woman in question, Nina Neetor...

Chapter 9

Nina Neetor didn't look anything like she had the last time I'd seen her. Back then she was beautiful, confident, and rather sexy if I must admit, but now... now she was none of those things.

She had on a gray terrycloth bathrobe and slippers, and as Reese helped her down the hall I could see that her face was badly bruised, one eye nearly closed, and each step she took seemed to be very painful. Ollie went to help and between the two of them they managed to get Nina settled on the sofa. I stood and watched, unsure if I should say anything, then decided to keep quiet. You could never get in trouble if you kept your mouth shut.

At least I had found this to be the case most of the time.

After a few minutes Ollie moved around the table and came to stand next to me. Reese sat next to her friend on the sofa and placed a hand gently on her knee, and then she glanced at me, her face angry.

"A client did this to her," Reese said, her voice seething with undisguised rage. "He beat her, he raped her, for more than twelve hours. It's what he likes to do. He pays Mya Brown very well and is immune to the regular rules regarding johns and escorts. You see, ordinarily it is understood that a client cannot physically injure a girl, no marks, especially on the face. If a client breaks this rule then he is dropped, or worse. Considering that Mya works for Innes Redbone I would imagine *much* worse. But not this man. He is excepted. He can do whatever he likes. I have come to learn that Nina is not the first girl who has been sent to him to come back in this condition."

"He's not local either," Ollie said. "In case you was wondering. He from some place out west. If he was local I might go and pay him a visit. Still might."

"They would not allow her to go to a hospital," Reese continued. "She was treated by one of the doctors they pay privately. Treated her wounds, sewed her up, gave her some meds. Mya told her she's got two weeks to recover and then she goes back to work. But Nina doesn't want to go back

to work, Derrick. Not for Mya Brown and not in this business anymore. She wants out. I'm going to help her, and I need your help too."

Great, I thought. Just what I need at this stage in my life, a war with the number one criminal in the Birmingham Metro area. Twenty years ago a prospect such as this would have thrilled me, *Once more onto the breach* and all that, but now...

Suddenly I paused in my thinking. Why the hell not now? Not dead yet.

"What are you thinking about, Reese?" I said.

She turned to Nina and stared at her for a long time, reaching up and gently stroking the other woman's arm.

"Baby, you've got to talk to him, tell him, he can help you if you talk to him."

Nina looked at Reese shyly, tears rolling down her black and blue face, shaking her head softly.

"He can't help," she whispered hoarsely through swollen lips. "No one can. They won't let me go. They'll kill me first. And my mom. They'll kill us before they let me go."

Reese took Nina gently in her arms as she sobbed. I turned to Ollie and nodded and we both stepped over to the opposite corner.

"She's got a point," I said in a low tone. "No way they're just going to let her walk away. Not Innes Redbone. Not Nestor Cabaña either. She belongs to them as far as they're concerned. Only way this can be done is to get her out of town; and anybody important to her too. *Way* out of town, out of the state and out of the region if possible. I don't know how far Redbone's connections go outside of Birmingham but I know you don't get to be as powerful as he is without some. She needs to go far away."

Ollie nodded.

"Yeah. And no doubt Innes got somebody keeping an eye out for that. They don't know she here yet. I seen to that, got her here quiet from her place down on 280. Soon they gonna be wantin' to know where she is, and like she say, she got a mamma. Innes people know that. Old lady not doing so well. She in Fairview Nursing Home down on the Bessemer Superhighway. You know it won't make no difference to Nestor, he go in there and fuck the

Extraction

old lady up if Innes say so. Boy got no scruples, he do anything that dawg he work for say.”

I nodded this time, glancing over at the two women still embracing on the sofa.

“She’s in no condition to travel right now anyway,” I said. “For the time being she’s probably safe. They gave her a couple of weeks. Maybe you should make sure they know where she is tomorrow, let it be known that she’s staying with her friend Reese while she recovers, and she’s closer to her mom here, Fairview’s only a couple miles or so away from here if I remember correctly. That way Innes and company don’t get nervous and do something rash. This will give us time to plan, and her some time to recover.”

“Sounds good,” Ollie said. “Knew calling you was the right thing to do. You good at all that thinking and planning shit. See all that time in the Air Force paid off again.”

I nodded.

“Yeah. Didn’t make me any smarter though. Otherwise I would not be about to get involved in something that is surely to make a very nasty man very unhappy with me. Actually two very nasty men. And let us not forget young Mr. Burrage, Innes’ shooter-in-chief. He may not be the sadist that Nestor is, but he will do what Innes says, especially if it involves killing.”

“I know,” Ollie said, taking his glasses off and wiping his eyes with the back of a knuckle. “And that boy is quick and accurate with a piece. You might want to plan hard on what to do about him. If I get a vote, I say shoot him in the back of the head first chance that come up.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said.

“By the way,” Ollie said, putting his glasses back on. “This ain’t a freebie. You gettin’ your full rate here, Reese insisted. And don’t worry, she got the bread, so do Nina. They smart women and invested right. Went to the same fancy investment planner dude. Apparently he smart with money and they got in the black before things took that turn on Wall Street.”

Good to know, I thought. My bank accounts were getting kind of light. I would have done the gig for nothing, but it was good that I wouldn’t have to. Now all I had to do was figure out just what the hell I was going to do, and how I’d get it done without the whole of the Birmingham underworld being pissed at me.

Stellen Qxz

A piece of cake.

Maybe two pieces of cake.

I had no clue.

But before long I knew I'd come up with something.

I usually did.

Chapter 10

Mason Masters closed the file folder on his desk and looked across at me, smiling.

“Damn boy, can you write a report,” he said. “Clear, precise, and understandable. Not like a lot of the bullshit I get from some of my other vendors. I like it.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said, leaning back in the client chair across from his desk. “I figure if everything stays on schedule we should be able to implement that phase in two or three months. Probably closer to three. No need to rush too much.”

“Agreed,” Mason said, leaning his considerable bulk forward and resting his thick arms on the back of his desk. As was usually the case, regardless of the time of year, the President and General Manager of Master-Plan Security was wearing a short sleeve button-down shirt with conservative tie. “I’ll let my operations manager have a look at this later, get his input. I’m sure he’ll agree with me, you’re a fucking genius.”

I chuckled softly.

“Far from it,” I said. “I just know what I’m doing. Unlike a lot of people in our business.”

Mason Masters nodded grimly.

“Ain’t that the truth,” he said. “So how’d that thing work out with that girl in Roebuck who was getting stalked? Guy still in jail?”

“Oh yeah,” I told him. “He’s not getting bail, and neither is his friend. If they have any brains they’ll plead and maybe get five years. This goes to trial it’s gonna be a lot worse.”

“Think he’s done with her now?” Mason said.

“Who knows,” I said. “People get stupid when it comes to relationships. Thus, stalking. I have no idea if this will snap him out of it or just increase his obsession. If he stays in jail a while he might get over it, then he might not.”

“And if he doesn’t you’ll be back to deal with him again?”

I nodded slowly.

“Me or somebody,” I said. “If it’s me I’m not likely to be so gentle as the last time.”

Mason Masters grinned.

“Gentle my ass. My understanding is that the fella spent several nights in the hospital ward at county after you got through with him. His friend was in even longer.”

“Life lessons,” I said. “Plus the idiot had a tire-iron. If he had been quicker he’d have gotten me.”

“Young Mr. Monroe told me he saw you in action,” Mason said. “Said you went through those guys like nothing. I doubt if they stood a chance. Tire-iron or not. And Ed said one was a judo expert.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The friend. Fuller. He needs refresher courses though.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Ed said the guy took him but you came in and saved him.”

“The kid would have been alright,” I said. “He got a little careless. He’ll learn. And if I hadn’t been there he’d have done something.”

“You like him?” Mason said.

“He’s alright,” I said. “Just green. Actually all of the ones you gave to me for that project were pretty good. Still, I was glad Monroe was with me when it went down. He’s probably the best you got right now.”

Mason nodded.

“I agree. Which is why I just promoted him to staff sergeant. His regular duties in Special Services include overseeing large cash transfers for our bank clients and meeting/event security. He’ll be one of my first full-time EP agents when I get that up and running.”

“Good,” I said. “Kid’s got what it takes I believe. As a matter of fact, I may have something coming up in a little while that I could use a bit of backup with. Think he’d be interested?”

“Of course,” Mason said. “You really impressed the hell out of him too. He thinks you walk on water or something.”

I smiled.

“All ex-Air Force officers can do that, Mace,” I said.

Extraction

He grinned too.

“And are they all as humble as you?”

“Nobody is as humble as me,” I said. “Nor as irresistible to members of the opposite sex.”

We both laughed.

Chapter 11

Friday night Paige Palmer made dinner for me at her house in Bush Hills. It had rained all day and when I got to her place a little past seven it was still pouring heavily. I put a big umbrella up over my head when I got out of the car in the driveway and as soon as I stepped up on the front porch I closed and shook it out. In the living room Paige took the umbrella from me and said she'd put it in the bathroom and let it hang in the shower to dry.

"It's been a mess all day," she said when she returned and went into the kitchen to check on dinner. "I hate it but I know how much we need the rain because of the drought."

I was sitting on a stool in the dinning room staring at Paige via the pass-through. She was wearing blue jeans and an orange T-shirt, both fit her rather nicely. She was leaning over looking into the oven. I was leaning forward and staring at her butt.

Paige turned her head sideways and glanced up at me, grinning.

"Are you staring at my ass, Mr. Olin?"

"Yes, Detective," I responded. "I am. It looks rather nice."

Paige stood and closed the oven.

"Thank you," she said. "But it's not on the menu for dinner."

"I can wait till dessert," I said.

Paige grinned again and came over to her side of the pass-through, leaning through and closing her eyes. I kissed her on the mouth.

"So what have you been up to lately?" she said, turning and checking the other pots and pans on top of the stove. "Rescuing any other damsels in distress?"

"Not so far," I said. "Been kind of slow lately. Did a report for Mace Masters over at Master-Plan. We're still working on his plans for an EP staff. What have you been up to since you became lead detective of the Criminal Intelligence Unit?"

Paige turned and glanced at me over her shoulder.

Extraction

“Up to my ass in a lot of bullshit,” she said. “And some backbiting. There are a few people in the unit who’ve got their noses out of joint because I got the slot and they didn’t. But that always happens when somebody gets promoted. Shit, if I hadn’t got it I know I’d probably have felt the same way about whoever did, regardless of how qualified they were. I’m dealing with it though. We’ve been making some progress on the technical side of things lately. Got some assistance from the feds with money and training for our electronics people. Got some new toys too, and have been getting to try them out. Been bugging some of the lower level crime networks in the area. I hope one day soon to be able to get up on the big fish. Folks like Manny Salazar, and especially Innes Redbone. I’d like nothing better than to be able to catch that fat fuck dirty and bust his whole outfit.”

“They’ll make you captain if you do that,” I said.

Paige turned once more and grinned.

“Well I should hope so,” she said. “I think I’d look good with captain’s bars. What do you think?”

“Captain’s bars and nothing else, right?” I said.

Paige laughed and stirred the contents of a pot.

“Then I know I’d be a big hit in the department.”

Dinner was served. Baked chicken, garlic seasoned mashed potatoes, whole kernel corn, and fresh-baked cornbread. In addition to being one of Birmingham’s finest, Paige Palmer is also a very good cook. During dinner we avoided talk of work and anything serious, making jokes, making one another laugh, enjoying the company.

Afterwards we rinsed the dishes in the sink before putting them in the dishwasher and then moved into the living room and sat on the sofa with cups of hot herbal tea.

“This is really good,” I said, sipping from my cup and glancing over at Paige beside me.

“Yeah,” she said, also sipping. “You turned me on to this stuff a few months back. Now I’m hooked. I found this blend at *Sam’s*. They have a really big selection, but this is one of my favorites now.”

I had another sip and then put the cup on the saucer on the coffee table in front of us. Paige had another sip and then I took her cup and put it down as well. She looked at me and smiled.

“I suppose you want *dessert* now?” she said.

I leaned over and put my hand on her thigh, stroking gently.

“It’s always a good idea to *taste* something sweet before going to bed,” I told her.

Paige smiled and leaned toward me. We kissed and she slid her arms around my neck as I pulled her into my arms.

Arousal was not long in coming and we didn’t even bother trying to make it to the bedroom. And not surprisingly, Paige had condoms under the cushions of the sofa. She laughed wickedly while pulling them out and handing one to me.

“Always prepared for everything, lover,” she said.

I took the condom and opened the package, leaning down to kiss her bare belly, and then suckled her right nipple.

“Good,” I said in a lust-filled voice, rolling the condom onto my erection. “Then you should be very ready for this.”

And she was.

Chapter 12

Nearly two weeks had gone by since the day that Ollie had called me over to Reese Tamblyn's house. It was the last Tuesday in March and very cold, but sunny. I was at Nina Neetor's condo on Cahaba Forest Cove off of Highway 280, south of Vestavia Hills. Despite all the fingers in the pie these days, high-class *whoredom* still seemed to be bringing in the big bucks. Nina had invested well indeed. The neighborhood was exclusive and expensive. I wondered how many others in Nina's profession lived in similar surroundings, or maybe even lived here.

Reese was there when I arrived and had opened the door for me when I reached the second floor backside unit. Today she had on another pair of tight blue jeans along with a brown pullover sweater, and it clung to every curve of her voluptuous body. She smiled and stood back to admit me, then closed the door and took me by the arm, leading me into the front room and over toward one of the two plush sofas. We sat, very close to one another.

"Nina's in back and will be out in a minute," Reese told me, turning on the sofa and bringing her left knee up and pressing it against the back cushion and tucked her foot under her right thigh. Now she was facing me. "Mya Brown called her this morning and told her she's due back at work this Friday. Got a client lined up who wants to spend the weekend with her in Atlanta. A regular. Nina didn't tell Mya no, but she doesn't want to do the job."

I nodded.

"Then she's going to have to say *no*," I said. "And mean it."

"She's afraid, Derrick. Terrified. You saw what that John did to her. If she speaks out to Mya what she gets next will be much worse. She might even get killed. Or they might come after her mom."

I nodded, staring at Reese for a moment, shifting sideways so that I could see her more directly.

“I know that, Reese,” I said. “And we already talked about this. If she wants to be free of these people then she’s going to have to make that decision, commit to it, and stick with it. Sure, there is danger, these folks are dangerous. Especially Innes Redbone. But if she wants out then she’s going to have to make some tough choices. And like I said before, she needs to get out of Birmingham. Staying in town would not be smart. She’d have to be guarded for the rest of her life, her mother too. And the odds would not be on her side. Eventually they would get to her.”

Reese stared back at me for a long moment and then sighed, nodding.

“I know you’re right, Derrick,” she said in a low tone. “And Nina probably knows you’re right too. But she’s not sure she can leave Birmingham. At least not with her mom. She’s really sick and the doctors at Fairview aren’t sure she should be moved any time soon, if ever.”

I sighed heavily and turned to stare out the window on my left. The view out back was that of a small pond, a couple of people walking by at the moment. Turning back toward Reese, I was about to say something when Nina Neetor came in wearing blue jeans and a pink pullover blouse. Today she looked much better, more like she did back when I’d first seen her in the shadow of the late Lionel Grayson. Most of the swelling had gone down on her face—a good bit of the rest concealed by makeup—her eyes were clear, and she seemed to be moving without difficulty under her own steam. Her straight blond hair was hanging loose around her shoulders and when she came in she offered a small smile.

I stood up as she approached.

“Thank you for coming today, Derrick,” she said in a soft voice, looking directly into my eyes. “I really appreciate this, and I also have a check for you. I want to make sure we start things off right. It’s just a retainer, you can bill me however you want.”

I shook my head.

“I appreciate that but it’s not the most important thing right now. Let’s sit and talk about your situation first.”

She nodded, glanced down at Reese. The other woman scooted back on the sofa and Nina sat, and so did I.

Extraction

Nina leaned back and crossed her long legs, resting her folded hands on her flat stomach. Reese tucked her knees under her and sat back on her feet, staring over at me. In another situation sitting on a sofa with two striking blondes might have been a lot more fun. But this is business.

"Reese told me that you got a call from Mya Brown this morning," I said. "She wants you back at work on Friday?"

Nina nodded slowly, staring down briefly before meeting my eyes once more. "Yeah. It's a guy I've met before. He's not bad. Treats me nice, even gives a good tip. Usually likes to take me over to Atlanta when he's in the area on business. He's from Dallas, comes in every couple of months."

"And you don't want to do this job, correct?"

Nina glanced over at Reese and the other woman nodded encouragingly.

"No, Derrick," Nina said in a slightly strained tone. "I don't. But I couldn't tell Mya that. If I had I don't know what she would have done, but I can imagine."

"So can I," I said. "But you know that if you want out of this life then you're going to have to tell her. Or you're just going to have to disappear. And before Friday."

Nina shook her head and glanced back at Reese once more, then at me, leaning forward with her hands on her crossed knees.

"I don't know if I can do that, Derrick. At least not as soon as Friday. I've been talking with my mom's doctors at Fairview and they don't think she is well enough to be moved. And even if she can be she'll need constant medical supervision, equipment and such. Plus I'd have to find a place for her to go with comparable care. That won't be easy. And if I'm not working regularly... Of course I suppose anywhere I go I can find work in my... *field*. At least temporarily until I find something else. I've got a degree in marketing. Maybe I can do something with that."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

Nina frowned slightly.

"You know what?" she said.

"That you have a marketing degree," I told her. "Back when you were seeing Lionel Grayson I ran a background check on you, that's how I

found out you were connected to Sweet Mya Brown, and through her, to Innes Redbone.”

Nina continued to stare for a few more moments, then shook her head and glanced away. Reese leaned over and touched her friend’s shoulder, squeezing. Nina put her hand on the other woman’s and they smiled at one another briefly, a little sadly.

“Derrick,” Nina finally said, turning back toward me, “can you protect me, and keep an eye on my mom, at least for a little while? Just till I can figure some stuff out, find a place that maybe we can go.”

This was not going the way I had hoped. I knew that the best way to do this was to get Nina and her mom out of Birmingham before Sweet Mya Brown and Innes Redbone knew anything about it. Get them some place far away with totally new lives. Staying in Birmingham was just asking for trouble for everybody; especially for me. But what could I do, other than walk away? Maybe I should run away. But not likely.

Fuck!

Mr. Olin, you really can be an idiot sometimes. *Damsels in distress.*
Shit.

Finally I nodded.

“Sure,” I said.

What else was there to say?

No perhaps?

Nope, couldn’t say that.

Yeah, *idiot*. No doubt about it.

On the bright side, it was better than spending eight days in a dank basement somewhere being repeatedly tortured by a cute but sadistic red-head.³

That silver lining thing again.

³ See *Deadline* by Stellen Qxz

Chapter 13

Wednesday morning I went over to Sandi's Gym in the Wildwood Shopping Center (South) and spent a couple of hours working out, using all of the strength and endurance building machines at least three times each in order to get a total body workout. When I finished, sweat poured from the top of my bald head and out of every part of my body, and I was kind of winded, but I also felt great.

A long hot shower followed and once I was dressed I went out front to reception and asked the well-built young man working there if Sandi was around. He told me that she had just gone into her office. I thanked him and walked toward the front doors, then over to the door on the right that was marked PRIVATE. I knocked and a moment later a husky female voice told me to enter.

Sandi Michaels is forty-seven, solid, well-muscled, and one of the toughest people I have ever known. Man or woman. And she's not bad to look at either. In fact, most recently she has begun dating a friend of mine from Lake Charles, Louisiana, although I can't really get either of them to tell me how their relationship is going, or even if it is still going. Although I suspect that it is.

"Well good morning, Derrick," Sandi said as she sat back in her large brown leather chair, one sneaker-clad foot resting on the back edge of her desk. "Saw your name on the early sign-in sheet. Wondered if you'd stop in and say hi before you left."

I walked over and sat in the high-back chair in front of the desk, much less comfortable than the one Sandi occupied, but then it was her office.

"Hi," I said. "Life looks comfortable for you. Sitting in here and just raking in the bucks from all those outrageous membership dues you charge."

"Yeah," Sandi grinned, lowering her foot and sitting up straight. "Ain't life grand?"

"For some of us," I said. "Heard from Rod lately?"

Sandi smiled again and shook her head.

"You don't let some things go, do you, Derrick? Like a dog with a meaty bone. Jesus. Yeah, talked with him this weekend. I might go down there in a month or so for a visit. Said he'd take me to a riverboat casino."

I chuckled, sitting back and bringing my left leg up, resting the ankle on my right knee.

"Well I hope your adventure with him is a lot more pleasant than the last one I had with him at a riverboat casino down there. I spent two months recovering under medical care after that."⁴

"I'm sure that won't be a problem," Sandi said, leaning forward on the back of her desk. "Of course, he might need a little *medical care* once I'm through with him though."

"Well, well," I said. "That answers so many questions. I'll bet you don't charge him full membership rates."

"And I don't charge you the full rates either, Mister," she retorted. "And besides, Rod is not a regular customer. So he has a *special* discount rate."

"I'm sure," I said. "Must be nice."

Sandi smiled primly, pursing her full lips together.

"Oh yeah, it is."

I shook my head, grinning.

"And on that note..." I said. "How are things otherwise?"

"Good," she said. "Business is up by ten percent this quarter. I can't complain. How about you?"

"There are always people who need my services," I told her. "Unfortunately for them. There is always work. And that's one of the reasons I come here, to keep my body in shape for the job that I do."

"Well, if I must say so myself, your body is in pretty good shape, Derrick."

"Glad you finally noticed," I said. "And as I'm sure Rod has remarked, you don't look bad yourself. I'm kind of jealous of my friend."

Sandi sat back in her chair and crossed her legs.

⁴ See *Inactive?* by Stellen Qxz

Extraction

“Well too late, Mr. Olin,” she said coolly. “Your opportunity has passed.”

We stared at one another for almost a minute with straight faces.

Then we burst into laughter.

Chapter 14

I went to the downtown 3rd Avenue North offices of Master-Plan Security to see Mason Masters, and when I pulled into the visitors' lot on the east side of the building, the first thing I noticed was a white Ford SUV with the logo for CBS-42 News on the sides. I pulled toward the back and parked, then climbed out and walked over to where the news truck set. It was empty at the moment, which likely meant that whoever it belonged to was probably inside Master-Plan right now. Interesting.

I walked around the front of the building and over to the west side where the main entrance was located. The receptionist at the front desk buzzed me in and smiled as I stepped inside. I was well-known here and usually didn't have to wait. Today that was not the case because at the moment Mason Masters was in an interview with a reporter from Channel-42. The receptionist asked if she could get me some coffee or something else while I waited. I said no thanks and went over to the sofa in the corner waiting area and sat down, glancing briefly through the magazines on the table—all of them having something to do with security—before settling in and putting my head back to think.

A few times someone passed through who knew me and stopped to talk for a while, and then they had to press on. I continued to sit and wait for maybe forty-five minutes and was becoming a little uncomfortable on the sofa. There is a small firing range on the basement level of this building and I was thinking about asking the receptionist to call the operations manager to see if I could get permission to go down. But then I heard voices down the corridor to the left of the desk and recognized one of them as belonging to the Master-Plan President. Another of the voices was familiar as well. Female, northern accent. I smiled and stood up.

The chief correspondent for CBS-42 News is a striking blonde in her mid-fifties by the name of Rhonie McDavid. To be honest she is the only reason that I ever watch any local news at all, and especially Channel 42. She

Extraction

stepped from the corridor into the reception area first wearing a yellow skirt and matching jacket and a white V-neck blouse that showcased her ample bosom. She was smiling as she glanced back talking to Mason Masters. He followed her in and behind him was a camera operator with his equipment in a bag across his back.

“Well thank you very much for your time, Mr. Masters,” Rhonie was saying as she stopped and turned to face him in front of the reception desk. “This has been really informative and I look forward to doing a follow up as the story progresses.”

“Well any time you like, Rhonie,” Mason Masters said with a large grin, reaching out to shake her hand. “I really enjoyed it. You’ve done a lot of good work on this already. If there’s anything you need further help on, just give me a call. I’m sure that I can help, or one of my people. We’ve got a lot of good folks working here.”

“I’m sure,” Rhonie said, still holding on to his hand. “From all I hear Master-Plan is the best.”

“We try,” Mason Masters said, and then he glanced over and saw me. “Derrick! Hey, didn’t know you were here.”

Rhonie McDavid and her camera operator turned toward me.

“Hey, Rhonie, this is Derrick Olin,” Mason said as he stepped over. “He’s the guy I told you was helping me put together my company’s executive protection team. Derrick, this is Rhonie McDavid of Channel 42; and her cameraman, Dave.”

Rhonie McDavid walked over and smiled, extending her hand, which I took.

“Good to meet you, Mr. Olin,” she said, her piercing blue eyes riveted on mine. “From the way Mr. Masters spoke of you I thought you’d have to be at least ten feet tall.”

I chuckled, never taking my eyes off of hers.

“Mace does tend to exaggerate,” I told her in a self-deprecating tone.

She smiled, still holding on to my hand, and still looking directly into my eyes as well.

“No I don’t, Rhonie,” Mason Masters spoke up. “This guy is everything I said he was and more. Best operator I know. When we get that EP

team together I want you to come back and do another story, and then you'll see just how good Derrick is."

Rhonie nodded and finally released my hand.

"I will," she said. "And to be honest, I'd love to get some time with Mr. Olin for this story I'm working on right now."

"Not a bad idea," Mason Masters said. "Derrick's been in the business a long time and nobody knows the security scene in Birmingham better."

I shot him a quick glance but he wasn't looking so he didn't see it, or maybe he was simply ignoring me.

"That would be great," Rhonie McDavid said to me.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of an interview, Ms. McDavid," I said.

"It wouldn't take very long," she said. "Really. Just some background stuff. If you didn't want to go on camera we could skip that part. But I really would like to talk to you. The story I'm working on is about local security companies, the good and the bad, where things need improvement, the problems, comparing the firms, and what is good about them as well. As you no doubt know, over the past couple of years the number of complaints against private security firms in the area has gone up significantly and my station is really interested in finding out why. In order to do this I need to talk to people in the business, good people with good insights. And from what I am given to understand from Mr. Masters, you fit that bill perfectly."

I glanced over at Mason Masters for a moment, then back at the reporter. If she had not been so damn good looking I probably would have said no. But she was *really* good looking; and she had said that I wouldn't have to go on camera...

So we set the interview up for Thursday afternoon at her studio office. Then Mason Masters and I watched Rhonie McDavid and her camera operator leave before he invited me back to his office.

"A hell of a woman," he said as he shut the door and pulled off his suit jacket, hanging it on the rack in the corner next to his desk. "Good reporter and damn fine to look at. Don't say I never did you any favors."

I shook my head and sat down in one of the chairs in front of the desk.

"I won't," I said sourly. "You know, Mace, maybe you shouldn't talk about me so much."

Extraction

“Derrick, publicity is good for business,” he said, pulling out his chair and dropping his large frame into it. “Hell, it builds business.”

“That’s fine for you,” I told him. “But I don’t like being put out in public. I’m not a businessman, I’m an operator.”

Mason Masters stared at me for several moments and sighed, nodding.

“Fair enough. Sorry. So what can I do for you?”

I stared at him for a few moments myself, then nodded.

“That thing I told you that I might need your help with,” I said.

“Looks like I’m going to need it now. Is Ed Monroe busy?”

Chapter 15

Wednesday night is *ladies' night* at Club-Dexter in Ensley and the place is always packed, regardless of weather or time of year. Usually I try to avoid the place on Wednesdays. Actually I usually try to avoid it during business hours period. Tonight this was not possible. Luckily for me I don't have to wait in line to get in. As soon as one of the very large black gentlemen at the front door recognized me I was ushered right in and handed off to the hostesses.

Reese Tamblyn is the hosting manager and was at the front station with a couple of other girls when I stepped in. They were all wearing little black dresses that revealed more than they covered and Reese was the most stunning of the *stunning* trio. I guess this is why she was the *head* hostess.

She stepped from behind the counter after telling the others that she would take care of me. One of them looked a little disappointed as she smiled at me. Reese took my left arm and led me into the club, past all the other patrons sitting, dancing, drinking, and having a good time without a care in the world. At least for the moment. There was so much noise around us that neither of us even bothered to try to speak until we reached the back corridor.

"Ollie's in his office," she said as I leaned down toward her so I could hear. "Earl's taking the night off and he's running the shop."

I nodded as she led me down the short corridor and turned right. A little ways down was a private office, no name plate. She knocked and Ollie's voice called for us to enter, and so we did.

Tonight Mr. Oliver was attired in an expensive black suit, matching shirt and tie. He really knew how to look deadly when he wanted to, and he always did it in style.

Ollie was seated behind his desk reading something off the computer screen of his desktop Dell. He glanced over when I came in and then went back to his reading. Reese shut the door and we moved in to sit on the two chairs in front of the desk.

Extraction

After another minute or so Ollie completed his reading and turned back to face us, removing his glasses for a moment to wipe his right eye with a knuckle.

"Must be important for you to come in here during business hours," Ollie said. "Especially on Ladies' Night. What up?"

"I take it you know the situation with Nina Neetor?" I said.

He nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Got complicated with the old lady and all. She want to stay in place and try to figure stuff out, but she don't want to turn tricks no more. Gonna get dangerous real fast for her."

"Yeah," I said. "I tried explaining that to her, but it didn't seem to do any good."

"That's not fair, Derrick," Reese put in. "She knows how dangerous it is but she can't get away right now. Not with the condition her mother is in."

I turned toward her.

"Reese, I know she's your friend and all, but I'm telling you now that something else is going on with her. She's not telling everything. Maybe you're not telling me everything, I don't know. But there is more to this. She says she wants to get out, asks you for help, you ask Ollie and he asks me. We try to give her help, to get her out, and now she's dragging her feet, knowing full well who we're dealing with. Now I said I'd help and I will, despite my reservations. But I want you to know that if I start to smell something bad here I might have to reevaluate my decision."

Reese Tamblyn's face suddenly contorted to outrage and she leaned forward and gave me a terrific glance down the front of her impressive cleavage.

"I would *not* lie to you, Derrick," she said forcefully. "I have been straight with you, told you everything about myself, my past, everything. And I asked for your help with Nina because I thought I could trust you. But if this is how..."

"You can trust him, Reese," Ollie cut in. "And you know it. I trust Derrick with my life, yours too. And Nina's. He not being a dick, he tell you something's wrong with your girl's story then there be something wrong with it. Listen to him. He say he gonna help but listen to him. What he say make

sense. She ought to wanna get outta here quick, regardless of her momma's health. Be better sick than dead if Innes Redbone come after her. She don't want to get out right now and that's not right. Something else going on, baby girl. He tellin' you straight."

Reese stared at Ollie hard for a long time, a tear forming in the lower corner of her left eye. She brushed it away and looked at me.

"I've been honest with you," she said in a subdued voice.

"I know," I said. "But can you say the same for Nina?"

A long pause. She looked down, then over at Ollie, and then back down at her hands. Her head moved almost imperceptibly, and she glanced up.

"I don't know," Reese whispered softly. "I just don't know."

I reached over and squeezed her hands, then turned back toward Ollie.

"I don't know either. And that's the reason I'm here. If I'm gonna do this I'm gonna need some serious assistance in addition to what else I've already got lined up. Is your *little friend* available for backup?"

Ollie nodded slowly.

"She just got back to town last night. Been over in Mississippi working on something. I can call her. I'm sure she don't mind."

"Good," I told him. "Make sure you tell her not to forget her MAC-11."

Ollie grinned thinly.

"Don't worry. Girl don't go to sleep without that thing, man."

Chapter 16

Reese and I were alone in the office. Ollie had to go out to deal with a problem on the floor. He really didn't have to go out and deal with it, he just wanted to. Ollie knew his bouncers were more than capable of dealing with anything that happened but he still liked to be there just in case. Truth be told I suspected that he just missed the action after moving into management.

Reese stood up and began to pace in back of the chairs. I stood and leaned against the front of the desk and watched her. After a few minutes she stopped and turned toward me, placing her hands on the backs of the chairs, staring at me with intensity.

"What if you're right?" she said. "What if she is holding something back? What if there is more?"

"Could be a problem," I told her calmly. "Depends on what it is. And this could get her hurt. I'll do the best I can to keep her safe, but if she doesn't get out of town and she doesn't intend to keep working for Mya Brown, then sooner or later they'll get her. As I said before, the odds are in their favor over the long run."

Reese was quiet again, looking around the room, and then she seemed to shiver and rubbed her bare arms with her hands.

"God I hate this, Derrick. She's one of my best friends and I don't want her hurt. But if you're right and she is lying, then I don't know what can be done. Maybe I should confront her with this."

"We don't know what *this* is yet, Reese," I told her. "And she'll only deny it right now. Better to wait until we have something. Maybe she'll tell you or maybe change her mind and decide to get out of town sooner rather than later. But I will tell you this, if she does decide to stay in Birmingham she should definitely get out of that condo."

"She can stay with me," Reese said. "I've got plenty of room."

"Not a good idea," I told her. "Then you'd be in danger."

"I don't care about that, Derrick. I want to help her."

“And you have,” I said. “By calling me. No need to put yourself at further risk in this thing. She should move into another place, some place less conspicuous. You should talk to her about this. And before Friday. If she’ll even go for that.”

Reese looked at me for a few moments and then nodded, sighing.

“I’ll give it a try in the morning. Are you going to start protecting her then?”

“Probably put somebody on her place tomorrow night,” I answered. “That’s why I wanted to talk to Ollie, and I’ve also got some help coming from another friend. Probably gonna have to have somebody keep an eye on Fairview too. Still got some details to work out, but yeah, everything will probably start tomorrow. It would just be better if she were living somewhere they don’t know about. Even so, with the resources that Innes Redbone has it won’t be long before he finds out where she is. And who’s helping her.”

“Will he come after you?” she asked, concerned.

“He’ll have somebody come talk with me,” I told her. “Probably one of two people. Nestor Cabaña or Frankie Burrage. More likely the latter because he knows I’ll kill the former if he comes near me.”

“Will they try to hurt you?” Reese asked.

“No,” I responded casually. “They won’t try to hurt me. They know better. If they can’t dissuade me—and they know they won’t be able to—then they’ll try to kill me.”

Reese’s face twisted painfully and she stepped between the chairs and put her hands on my chest.

“Not to worry, love,” I told her soothingly, feeling an old familiar smile start to rise from within. “Like I said, they’ll *try* to kill me.”

Chapter 17

After dinner I went into my bedroom and into the closet where my weapons storage locker was kept. I opened the locker and examined its contents, handguns, shotguns, rifles, and submachine guns; and a few bladed and some non-lethal weapons as well.

After a few minutes of visual inspection I reached inside and began taking items out, moving over to the bed and setting them down. There was a Glock-21 full-sized .45 caliber pistol and its kid, the G-30 compact. There was a Kel-Tec P-32 and a Colt Python Elite .357 magnum. And then there was a Benelli M1 Super 90 12 gauge, a Steyr AUG A-3 .223 caliber assault rifle, and a Heckler & Koch UMP .45 caliber submachine gun. Party favors. At least they are for the kinds of parties that I throw.

I pulled a chair over to the bed and set to work inspecting each piece, making sure all the moving parts worked as they were supposed to—which I had no doubt they would—and once I was satisfied I went back to the locker and removed the large ammunition box from the bottom shelf, bringing it over and setting it on the floor next to the bed. Spare magazines, speed-loaders, and a large amount of ammunition in various calibers filled the box. I spent the next twenty minutes loading every weapon, setting safeties if the weapons had them, then resecured the box in the locker.

The situation with Nina Neetor was still bothering me but right now there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. Other than walk away, and for some strange reason that option didn't appeal to me at the moment. So I was preparing to do battle, as I had done so many times in the past. The end result to all of this would be quite interesting. Couldn't wait to see how it would all go.

I took a large duffel from the top shelf of the closet and loaded all of the weapons and spare ammo clips and such into it, save for the G-30. It was the weapon that I usually carried on me when working and from now on it

would never be far from my hand. I put it on the nightstand next to the bed and then set the duffel on the floor beside the door.

The digital clock by the bed showed the time to be eight-thirty. Too early for me to go to bed and I didn't feel like going into the front room and watching TV. And I really didn't feel like trying to struggle with Nietzsche anymore at the moment. But then I smiled and went into the living room and sat down on the sofa, turning on the lamp and picking up the phone on the coffee table.

The line rang four times before being picked up.

"Hey, sexy," Paige Palmer said in a sensuous voice. "I was just thinking about you."

"Then you should have called me first," I said.

"You beat me to it," she said. "What you doing?"

"Oh, just sorting through a few things, didn't really want to watch TV or read right now. How about you?"

"I actually had dinner with three of my boys tonight," Paige said. "And surprise of surprises, they *bought* dinner. I almost cried."

I chuckled and settled back into the sofa cushions.

"Well I'm glad you got to spend some time with them," I told her. "How are they?"

"Fine," Paige said. "All of them are fine. Even Jermane, who had to work tonight. No more trouble for any of them and I have to tell you I am glad. Kind of embarrassing being a cop and your boys keep getting into trouble with the law. But that looks to be behind them now. I'm keeping my fingers crossed though."

"Well I'm glad they're doing okay," I said. "And how's work?"

"Going good too," Paige said. "Vice-Narcotics might be about to make some minor drug arrests next week off of some of the intel one of our better sources has provided. Low level dealers but they've got some big league ties. Might make business difficult for them for about an hour. But every little bit helps."

"Anybody I know in the big leagues?" I said.

"You know better than to ask that," Paige chided playfully. "That's classified police information, Mister. I can't share with civilians."

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“Not even if the civilian in question is intimately familiar with your clit?” I said.

Paige laughed.

“Well maybe in that case,” she managed. “But it would probably have to be during an occasion when you *were* being intimately familiar with my clit, sir. So if you want me to spill anything you’re gonna have to come over and... well *come* over.”

I laughed, closing my eyes.

“I’ll keep it in mind. Really I just called to check in and see how you were.”

“Well I’m glad you did,” she said. “Good to hear from you. You going to be busy this weekend?”

“Probably,” I said. “Got something starting in the next day or so. Could go on a while.”

“Really?” she said. “What?”

“Sorry, Detective,” I replied coyly. “That’s classified bodyguard information. I can’t divulge it.”

Paige snorted down the line.

“Uh huh,” she said. “So you can’t tell me. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you *do* like anal sex, don’t you?”

I laughed, feeling a tug in my loins.

“You know I do,” I said.

“So that means you probably want to keep me happy and in a receptive mood, right? Especially because you seem to think I’ve got such a great booty; and apparently can’t get enough of *fucking* it.”

I chuckled again.

“Baby, don’t play around with me. We both know that you’re always in a *receptive* mood; and you do have a great booty. The best. Also, if you don’t stop goofing around I’m liable to drive over to your place this very night and pull your pants down and give you a good *spanking*. To begin with...”

Paige laughed.

“To begin with, huh? And then what?”

“Oh you know what,” I teased. “And by the way, I’m getting really hard right now.”

“Serves you right,” she retorted. “I hope he gets so hard that you can’t even sleep, and if you do then you dream about me all night.”

“Bad girl,” I said. “You know you’re gonna pay next time we get together.”

“Can’t wait,” she said.

“Me either,” I said.

We talked for another ten minutes and then decided that if we didn’t end the conversation immediately we were both in danger of serious physical injury due to the intense sexual pressures building up inside our bodies.

And Paige got her wish too. At least in part.

It was a long time before my erection subsided.

I didn’t dream about her that night though, another woman from years in the past came into my dreams. That kind of surprised me because I tried not to think about her at all and never dreamed about her. That I remembered anyhow.

Oh well, it was a pretty good dream so I didn’t really mind. And on Thursday morning when I woke up my hard-on had returned.

I was also smiling like an idiot.

Chapter 18

Rhonie McDavid's office is located on the third floor of the CBS-42 studios on Golden Crest Drive in Homewood, just a few miles from my place on Green Springs. I arrived at ten minutes to two and was a little surprised to find the reporter herself waiting for me at reception. After we shook hands she signed me in and I was issued a visitor's pass, then Rhonie escorted me to the elevators around the corner from the security desk and we went up.

Today she had on green. A knee length skirt and matching sweater blouse, the top two buttons undone. Her shoes were also green with about three inches of heel. Even with this assistance that still put her about three inches or so shorter than me. As the elevator car moved slowly upward we both stood facing the doors and I could see her reflection in the polished surface. I suspected she was looking at mine as well.

When the doors slid open she told me to follow her, and I did, and we went to the left, down a long corridor, then right down a shorter one until we reached her office on the corner back. It was spacious, as befitting a chief correspondent. Windows on both sides, large steel desk, comfortable oversized gray swivel desk chair, a small dark leather sofa in the corner, and two straight-back chairs in front of the desk.

Rhonie asked me to sit in on one of the chairs in front of her desk and she took the other one, turning it so that she was facing me. I did the same and we were very close and cozy. She smiled, reaching for a notepad and pen on the front of her desk. She crossed her shapely legs and didn't bother to pull her skirt down to cover her knees, much to my delight.

I cleared my throat as quietly as possible and adjusted the blue blazer I had put on for this occasion.

Rhonie flipped over a couple of pages in her notebook and then uncapped her pen as she glanced up at me, smiling charmingly.

"Thanks again for coming today, Mr. Olin," she said. "I really appreciate this."

“No sweat,” I told her. “And as I said downstairs, please call me Derrick. I hate formality and with me there is no reason for it. I’m not in charge of anything, don’t run a big company, I’m simply a freelancer—a free-agent for-hire.”

The veteran reporter smiled at me.

“I think you’re a lot more than that, Derrick,” she said. “You’re being too modest. I don’t mean to make you mad, but after we met yesterday, and in anticipation of this interview, I went online and did some research on you.”

I don’t know why I was surprised, she was, after all, a very good reporter. Yet, I was a little taken aback, but covered it well—at least I think I did.

“Of course you did,” I said with a half smile. “And what did you learn?”

She glanced down at her notebook for a moment and then back at me.

“You were born here in Birmingham—though you have no trace of a regional accent. You grew up on the west side of town, Ensley, went to public school, and then went to Samford University where you graduated with a BA in sociology in 1989. You were in the ROTC program at Samford and when you graduated you received a commission as a second lieutenant and for the next ten years you were an Air Force officer. You did nearly two years in the Security Police, and then transferred into the Office of Special Investigations where you remained for the rest of your career. Most of your postings in AFOSI were unavailable through a general search, but I do know you had some assignments in counterintelligence and antiterrorism. You were a lead special agent and when you left the service you were a captain. After a brief time you returned to Birmingham and have been here ever since, working in the private security field. You are very well thought of by your clients, and by people like Mason Masters of Master-Plan. One of your biggest fans besides Masters is a gentleman named Marc Guyerson, head of corporate security for

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the Colonial Bank Group⁵. My understanding is that he would like to hire you on full-time for the bank but you won't go for it."

Rhonie stopped talking then and continued staring at me. A few moments passed and I nodded, smiling grudgingly.

"Well you are rather thorough, Rhonie," I said. "Guess there's no need for us to have an interview now. You seem to have it all."

She shook her head.

"Hardly. That's mostly surface stuff, nothing really in-depth, and besides, this is actually supposed to be background on the security business in Birmingham. I just wanted to get to know you a little better before we talked. And I got the feeling when we talked yesterday that you would not be so forthcoming about yourself. I also got a call from Mason Masters last night. He told me that you weren't really happy to be doing this interview and that I should not attempt to get you to go on camera for it. He also told me I should promise that you will not be quoted by name in the story."

I smiled again.

"And what did you say?"

"I said I would do this," she said. "If a source doesn't want to go on the record I don't make them, but I'll only run their information if I believe it is accurate and sincere. That's the other reason I checked you out. Now I have no doubts. Okay?"

I paused and then nodded.

"Okay," I said.

"Good," Rhonie McDavid smiled and poised her pen above her pad. "Shall we get started then?"

"Sure," I said.

Rhonie smiled at me once more and asked her first question.

⁵ In August of 2009 Colonial Bank of Alabama failed and was taken over by BB&T of North Carolina, however for the purposes of this series of novels Colonial still exists.

Chapter 19

Although I don't really like to spend a lot of time explaining what I think about a lot of things, it doesn't mean that I don't spend a lot of time thinking about those things. Which means I do have quite a lot to say, and for some reason I couldn't really understand, today I decided to say many of those things to Rhonie McDavid, at least those that pertain to the state of private security in general, and in Birmingham, Alabama in specific. She was a very good reporter, a good listener, and knew just how to ask the right questions to draw a subject out. I got the feeling she would have made an excellent OSI interrogator back in my day. Probably didn't hurt that she was gorgeous and knew it, and knew how to use that to her advantage.

"There are several key problems as I see it. The first is the lack of really professional training. For the most part companies hire people one day and then they're working on post the next, sometimes even armed. Most companies offer an eight hour course before putting officers in the field, an additional four hours if they are going to be armed. That is simply ridiculous. There is no way an individual can learn even a tenth of what they need to know in order to be an effective security officer in just eight hours. And as for firearms training, four hours is just enough time to make somebody dangerous with a weapon. It's an absolute mystery to me why there aren't more incidents where guards screw up and people get hurt in the process."

"You'd think the threat of law suits would make the companies do a better job on training?" Rhonie offered.

"It's a numbers and averages game," I responded. "Just like so much in life these days. They figure it is more profitable to take the risk than to pay the money it would cost to really train their personnel to effective standards. And since just about every other company in the area does it the same way, there is at least some uniformity. They're all in the same boat. And it's worked out pretty well for them so far. Over the last ten years I can only recall a couple of law suits resulting from injuries suffered by civilians at the

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hands of security guards, only one made it all the way to verdict. Even then the appellant court slashed the judgment to a quarter of what the jury had awarded. That company, by the way, went out of business right after that case concluded. Even so, others soon took its place.”

Rhonie made some notes, uncrossed and recrossed her legs, and still didn't pull her skirt down over her knees. I glanced away briefly, noticing the pictures on the table behind her desk. I knew she was married, her husband a former employee at the station, now teaching somewhere. She also had three grown sons and a young daughter adopted from Kosovo about five years ago. There were pictures of all of the members of her family on display, even photos of people I assumed to be her parents.

Rhonie looked over at me once more.

“What are some of the other problems you see?” she asked.

“Too many to name here,” I told her. “But I suppose I'd have to say one of the major problems is the pay. Security guards aren't paid much beyond minimum wage. And with low pay like that you aren't liable to recruit quality personnel in the first place. And if you think about it, with the responsibilities that are placed on security guards—many of them protect millions of dollars worth of property and hundreds or thousands of lives every day—why is it they are paid so little for their efforts? Really doesn't make a hell of a lot of sense. If you want decent personnel you're going to have to pay them better, and you're going to have to train them. Make them professional officers. That means putting together a first-rate training program that lasts more than eight hours. Weeks, even months to be honest, and ongoing training throughout their careers. Also the opportunity for advancement; and make that advancement based on skill, performance, and merit. Make those promotions mean something, and make sure the people receiving them deserve them.”

“So is that what Master-Plan is doing?” Rhonie asked, writing while looking up at me. “When we were speaking yesterday he said many of the same things that you are saying now and was telling me how different his company was. Their training is longer and more thorough, his pay scale is a lot higher than the average, and his clientele are of a quality that seems to understand the necessity for a better trained security force.”

I nodded, shifting in my chair.

“Master-Plan is one of the few exceptions,” I told her. “There is still room for improvement, but I am happy to say that Mason Masters’ shop is a good example of the way things should be done. They recruit the best people available, train them thoroughly, and pay them a good wage, a living wage. The other thing they do well is provide excellent field supervision. Another problem many companies have is the lack of supervision of their officers at their posts. In many situations there is only one guard on duty per shift and he or she is responsible for everything security related at their posts during their shifts. But even so, they should expect to be visited by a supervisor at random, to check on them and make sure they are alright, and also to make sure they are doing their jobs. Master-Plan is very good at this. They have several patrol supervisors on duty per shift and a senior shift supervisor who makes spot checks at different times as well. They also have dispatchers in the operations center around-the-clock and their job is to make regular check-ins with each post. Any post they fail to make contact with is immediately visited by a field supervisor. They don’t leave anything to chance.”

Rhonie nodded, smiled, and then wrote on her pad once more, flipping the page over when she was done.

“How do you think the problems could best be fixed, Derrick?” she asked. “Or do you think they can be?”

“Oh they can absolutely be fixed, Rhonie,” I told her earnestly. “The thing is I don’t really think anybody wants to fix them. It would cost too much money, and they are in business to make a profit. Which, in my humble opinion, is part of the problem too. Maybe the biggest part of the problem.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, frowning slightly.

“Well,” I said at length, collecting my thoughts and trying to figure out just how I wanted to phrase this. “The best example I can think of is what happened immediately following 11 September 2001. Everybody was frightened, thought the country was going to be overrun by bomb-tossing Muslims bent on *jihad*. As a result people screamed at the government for more protection, more security, more cops, more soldiers. Unfortunately it’s not all that easy to build up an army or police force overnight. Too many regulations and standards. But in the private sector this is not the case. Where there is the opportunity for profit anything can be accomplished. And that is just what happened. All of these private contractors started springing up and al-

most overnight you couldn't look in one direction without seeing large private security armies all over the place. Guys with automatic weapons dressed in black and looking like Rambo. The companies touted their personnel as being highly trained and professional operators with many years experience in the military and law enforcement—and I'm sure some of them were. However, the vast majority of them weren't. Hell, in a lot of cases some of these people had never held a gun until they got hired on by these private companies. And the reason they got hired was because for every *body* the company had on the payroll that was more money they could charge; and there was a lot of money out there at that time, believe me.

"Even here in Birmingham there was a boon in the security business. Every office building, every bank, every courthouse, people who never would have even thought of hiring a security guard before were desperate to hire somebody to protect them from the threats that they were sure were out there. Somebody in a uniform with a gun. Somebody they assumed would have proper training and be competent at their jobs. Surprise on them."

Rhonie was making furious notes and I paused while she finished.

"You don't paint a very good picture, Derrick," she said after glancing up. "And as I sit here listening to you it does start me to wondering. I remember September 2001 too. I remember how things became back then. Here at the studio we had a meeting about security, and right after that more guards were hired. Old guys and some kids. All of them armed, and that was a change from before because we never used to have armed guards in this building. And I guess you're right, we all assumed they would know how to handle themselves and the weapons they were given if something did happen. But now..."

"Just be thankful nothing has happened," I told her flatly. "Because I suspect you would not like the results if something did."

She stared at me soberly for a few moments and then shook her head, making another note. She closed the notepad and leaned over to put it and her pen on the desk, folding her hands in her lap and staring at me intently for a long time.

By now I was comfortable and didn't have a problem sitting quietly under the reporter's gaze. Actually I rather liked it. She had a very beautiful face, even the small age lines here and there only increased her attractiveness.

“You’ve told me a lot more than I probably wanted to know, Derrick,” Rhonie finally said, glancing over toward the clock on the wall over her door. “I really wish I could get you on camera for an interview, but I won’t push it. You’ve given me a lot to think about too, another direction I might take this story in. I’ll have to give it some more thought.”

I nodded.

“Glad to help.”

She smiled.

“Not sure it was really help,” she told me. “I thought I was almost done until we talked, now it might take several more weeks before I can put this story to bed. But I shouldn’t complain. It’ll make it a better story in the end I think. I just hope my producer agrees.”

I nodded again but said nothing.

“I really have enjoyed this, Derrick,” she continued. “You’re a very insightful man. I’d like the opportunity to talk with you again if I might.”

“Sure,” I told her. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Good,” she said, uncrossing her legs and leaning forward. “And it doesn’t have to be on the subject of private security. I have a feeling you have opinions and insights into a lot of other things. Maybe we could have lunch sometime?”

“Sure,” I nodded. “Sounds good.”

Rhonie nodded, stood up and leaned over to the back of her desk. I was going to try to look away but decided not to. She leaned over the desk and had to know I was going to look, so I did, but glanced away before she turned back toward me.

Rhonie had a business card in her left hand and she handed it to me as I stood up.

“This has all my numbers on it. Handwritten on the back is my personal cell.”

I glanced at the card while reaching back and taking out my wallet. I put the card inside and pulled out one of my own. It was a simple white card with my cell phone and e-mail address on it, printed off of my laptop. I didn’t spend money of fancy business cards, especially when I could do a good enough job with my own computer and printer.

Rhonie glanced at the card.

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"You don't even put your name on your cards?" she said with a smile.
"You really do like anonymity."

I shrugged.

"Anybody I give a card to knows who they're calling."

"I suppose they do," she said, setting the card on her desk and turning back to me. "Thank you very much for your time, Derrick. And I look forward to seeing you again real soon. For that lunch at least."

I nodded and raised my hand. She raised hers and we shook, staring directly into one another's eyes.

"Can't wait," I said.

The handshake had ended but we were still holding onto each other's hands. Finally we let go and Rhonie McDavid escorted me back out into the corridor and down to the elevator. There we said good bye, shook hands once more, briefly this time, and then I rode down to the lobby by myself.

That was probably a good thing. I got the feeling that if she had come into the elevator with me, by the time we reached the first floor lobby I would have confirmed my suspicions that Rhonie McDavid was indeed a *natural* blonde.

As things appeared to be proceeding, at least in my estimation, I was probably going gain that insight sooner rather than later anyhow.

Lunch she had said.

And afterwards maybe a little... *dessert*.

Chapter 20

Friday morning at nine o'clock *Sweet Mya Brown* showed up at Nina's condo unannounced. Accompanying the madam-in-chief were two associates, a prissy little man dressed in an expensive dark suit by the name of Carter, and a large black man with a cleanly shaved head like mine and muscles that no expensively tailored suit could ever conceal. His name was Jonas and he was, obviously, the *muscle*.

Even though the visit had not been announced in advance, Nina had told me that it was not unusual for her boss to drop by on the day when one of her girls was expected to go away with a big client. And for this reason I had been at the condo since seven. By nine I had already had breakfast, emptied my bladder, and come up with a plan for dealing with the situation when it arose.

I opened the front door wearing jeans, a blue sweat shirt, and black boots. Sweet Mya Brown stood before me wearing a navy skirt suit and green blouse. She was short, maybe five-two or three, but her body was proportional and striking even under her suit. I could just imagine that she had been quite a success in her former profession, and I guessed that Innes Redbone had no complaints in the sex department either. That latter thought turned my stomach as brief images of that *portly puke* and this sensual creature interlocked in sexual congress passed through my mind.

I had never met her before and was surprised to find that she had grayish hazel eyes, most remarkable. She also had a large nose and thick, full lips and her skin was the color of fine honey, whatever the hell that meant. I'd heard the description about another woman of the same complexion as Ms. Brown's some years ago and now it came back to me. And then there was her hair. Black and long, hanging all the way down her back, thick and glossy. The woman put a lot of effort in her appearance, and it paid off tremendously.

"Good morning," I said cheerily. "May I help you?"

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The high-class madam frowned and stared up at me, then looked at the number next to the door frame.

“Yes, is Nina in?” she said in a soft voice.

“Why yes she is,” I said. “And who might I say is calling?”

Mya Brown stared back at me in confusion and then put a hand on her shapely left hip, defiant.

“Who am I? Who *is* you? This Nina’s place, right? Who the fuck are you asking me *who* I am?”

Beautiful woman and a foul mouth. In some circumstances that didn’t bother me, might even arouse me. These were not those circumstances. Nonetheless, I was still my complete pleasant self.

“My name is Derrick Olin,” I told her. “And I’m a friend of Nina’s. Now, might I have your names?”

Mya Brown continued to stare at me with undisguised hostility, and then she waved her hand in my face dismissively, turned to Jonas.

“Jonas, get this fool outta my way.”

The big man nodded as his boss stepped back out of the way. He stepped into the doorway and his body barely fit. Didn’t matter, before he was all the way in my left foot struck out and smashed into his right knee and he went down hard, grunting in pain. I followed up quickly by ramming my right knee into his nose and knocking him back into the hallway, landing on his butt between Sweet Mya Brown and her other associate. They both stood staring down at a man they had believed to be invincible and their expressions registered the shock of the new reality unfolding before them. Mya Brown turned to stare at me and now her arrogance had been replaced with uncertainty.

“How you do that?” she demanded, her right hand caressing her chin. “Who the fuck *is* you?”

“As I said before,” I replied calmly. “My name is Derrick Olin and I’m a friend of Nina’s. Now could you tell me who you are?”

She looked back down at her bodyguard on the floor still clutching his injuries, then back at me. That’s when she told me her name, which I already knew, and the names of her associates.

I nodded and stepped back, inviting her in, and just her. While everyone’s attention had been focused on me they hadn’t noticed the small dark

haired young woman ease down the hallway behind them, a MAC-11 submachine gun slung across her chest, her dark eyes devoid of anything even remotely human.

“My friend there will keep your friends company out here while we talk,” I told the madam as she glanced back down the hallway. “Don’t worry, she won’t hurt them. Unless they act stupid. And I give you the same assurances. We just want to talk.”

Sweet Mya Brown glanced down at Jonas once more and then over at Carter. She took a deep breath and stepped all the way into the room.

I shut the door behind her.

Chapter 21

The three of us sat in Nina's well-furnished living room. Sweet Mya Brown on one of the white overstuffed armchairs against the front wall, me on a matching chair to her right separated by an end table with a fancy covered lamp on top, and Nina on the sofa directly across from us. Nina had on jeans once again today and a turquoise long sleeve button-down blouse. She crossed her long legs and stared across at her soon-to-be former employer with trepidation in her blue eyes.

The madam, for her part, had regained some of her composure, but she was not nearly as certain of herself as she had been, or was used to being. She sat with her knees together beneath her skirt, the purse that had been slung across her right arm now at her feet on the floor. She leaned forward and stared at Nina Neetor, then glanced briefly at me.

"I don't understand this, Nina," she said in a measured voice. "Who is this guy and why is he here? You know you've got a job today. You don't have time to be visiting with friends. And who's that out in the hall with that Uzi?"

"Not an Uzi," I chimed in. "It's an Ingram MAC-11. Common mistake for somebody who doesn't know weapons."

Sweet Mya Brown cut me a quick glance, twisted her mouth sourly, and then looked at Nina once more.

"What are you doing here, Nina?" she said. "You know you have responsibilities, work to do. I don't understand."

Nina looked over at me, crossing her arms over her chest. I stared back at her for a few moments and then nodded.

Nina sighed, took a deep breath, and looked back at the woman seated across from her.

"I want out, Mya," she said in a sheepish voice. "I can't do this anymore. I can't go through what I have for the past couple of weeks if another john abuses me like that other guy did."

"I told you you wouldn't have to see him again," Sweet Mya Brown said in a dismissive and irritated tone. "It was a one-time thing, I promise. That guy's a special case. He is a little rough, and that's why I don't make the girls go with him but once. And he don't come around that often. But you don't have to see him no more. I promise."

Nina shook her head.

"No, I can't. I don't want to do this anymore. I told you before that I didn't plan on doing this all my life. I'm thirty-three now and should have gotten out years ago. That guy really hurt me and I can't risk that again. I might want to have kids some day and if I keep doing this I know I won't be able to. It might already be too late."

"Girl, don't talk like that," Sweet Mya Brown told her. "You still young. You got time. But right now you got responsibilities and obligations. You know that. You can't just walk away. I'm telling you that you need to think about this. Think about what you're doing."

"She has," I said coolly. "And she's made her decision. Now you have to respect it, Ms. Brown."

The madam turned and looked at me, contempt rising in her beautiful eyes. She pursed her thick lips for a moment.

"And what are you gettin' outta this, *nigga*? She *doin'* you or something? You want her to be your own private *ho*?"

"No," I replied. "I'm not your competition, Ms. Brown. That's not my business. Protecting people is. That's why I'm here."

"Well you might have been able to put Jonas down out there because he wasn't ready for you, but I know some people you can't do that to. They dust *yo* black ass without thinkin'."

"Yeah," I said. "I know who you're thinking about. And I know who you work for, who your man is."

"Then you oughta know to stay the fuck outta this fore' you *git* hurt, maybe *kilt*. I might be in the mind to forgive this so far, but if I have to pass this along..."

"I expect you will run right out of here and call your boy Innes as soon as you can," I told her. "And when you do, tell him Derrick Olin says hi, and that he's in this till the end. And tell him also that if he sends Nestor Ca-

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baña into this it will be my greatest pleasure to cut his head off and send it back to him gift wrapped.”

Sweet Mya Brown’s eyes widened, no doubt unaccustomed to someone not showing fear at the mere mention of the name of Innes Redbone, or Nestor Cabaña for that matter.

“You don’t know what trouble you making for yourself, man,” she said after a pause. “And you neither, Nina. You betta think about this shit. You got a mama to think about, remember that.”

Nina flinched. I shook my head.

“I’d advise against that, Mya,” I said in the same cool tone. “I would take just as much offense if something unpleasant happened to Ms. Sandborne.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you take offense to, *nigga!*” the arrogance had returned in full. She stood up and faced me. “You might think you bad, but you ain’t! You push this and you gonna *git* yours. Just watch!”

I sighed and glanced around the room for a moment, then stood slowly, facing the little madam, staring down into her eyes, knowing that mine were completely empty. She moved back a quick pace, fear and uncertainty making a quick return.

“No need to be concerned,” I told her. “I promised you wouldn’t be harmed as long as you behaved. I keep my promises. You’re free to leave now. Pass my message along to Innes, tell him we should talk. Tell him not to do anything stupid. He’s got my number I’m sure.”

Sweet Mya Brown stared up at me for almost a minute, her composure gradually returning. She glanced over at Nina Neetor and shook her head, then reached down for her purse and started for the door. I turned to watch her, not that I was all that concerned she would try to do something, I just wanted to get a look at her ass. Big and round. Probably bounce a quarter off of it too; or *something* else. Innes Redbone you lucky dick. No pun intended.

She went out and left the door open.

I stepped over and watched as Jonas and Carter fell in step behind her and they all walked down the corridor, Sheila leaning against the wall with her MAC-11 hanging casually by her side. At the corner, Jonas turned and glanced back, his eyes cold and dark.

Another friend made today.

Sheila turned to me.

“Cover the perimeter for now,” I told her and she nodded.

I went back inside and closed the door and walked back into the living room. Nina was still sitting on the sofa, both feet on the floor, her knees together, and she was bent forward crying.

Great. I hate dealing with emotions, I was not well-equipped. Then on the other hand, I did have a degree in sociology; what a joke that was.

I sat down next to her on the sofa and slipped an arm around her shoulders, gently squeezing. After a minute she turned into me and put her head on my shoulder and cried even harder.

As I held Nina my mind really wasn't on her, I was thinking about Innes Redbone and what his reaction would be once Mya Brown told him about this. What would he do next? Would I be dealing with Nestor Cabaña anytime soon? Or maybe Frankie Burrage?

Or would Innes be reasonable for once?

Probably more chance of peace breaking out between the Israelis and the Palestinians than of Innes Redbone being reasonable about anything.

Chapter 22

The Fairview Nursing Home is set on a hill on Beacon Drive overlooking the Bessemer Superhighway in Midfield about four blocks from the Midfield Police Department. My understanding is that it is one of the best facilities of its kind in the area and has a reputation for caring for elderly patients with special needs; and a good bank account or fantastic medical insurance coverage. This is where Nina Neeter's mother, Gloria Sandborne, had been in residence for the past three and a half years since her stroke. She had been left partially paralyzed on her left side, unable to walk, and could not speak. Needless to say she required constant care and monitoring by doctors and nurses. And also needless to say she would make perfect leverage to use against Nina.

It was eight p.m. Friday night and I was sitting in a black GEO SUV parked on the east side of the Fairview property which offered an unrestricted view of the entrance. Seated beside me and behind the steering wheel was Edgar Monroe, Staff Sergeant with the Special Services Branch of Master-Plan Security. He was sipping coffee and watching the grounds, his head moving slowly, his eyes taking everything in. On the floor between our seats was a Remington 12 gauge shotgun, a weapon with which I knew the young man was intimately familiar and highly proficient.

"You think they'll really try to come in here after the old lady?" Ed Monroe said, glancing over at me as he sipped his coffee. "I mean this place has security, locked doors, and the cops are just down the block."

I was looking out the window on my side and took my time before turning back toward him and responding.

"The kind of people we're dealing with don't really care about things like that, Ed," I said patiently. "They don't care about locks or guards or even the police. Especially not the Midfield Police. At night they maybe have three cops on the streets and one in the station down the road. That wouldn't even give goose-bumps to anybody that Innes Redbone would send over here."

Ruthless. That's the kind of people we're dealing with. And it's important you understand that, Ed. For the sake of the client and your own."

He looked at me for a moment and then nodded slowly, turning back and starting to survey the grounds once more.

"They probably won't try anything right away," I went on. "At least not as it pertains to Ms. Sandborne. They don't want the hassle of coming in here and possibly getting the cops involved. They'll wait on that a bit. First thing they'll do is try to convince Nina that she needs to reconsider."

"How will they do that? She's already told them she wants out. What else will they try to do, talk?"

"At first, probably," I told him. "Mya Brown will most likely convince Redbone that she can persuade Nina to come back on her own with no need for extreme measures. She'll try getting Nina to agree to talk alone with her, *reason* with her, even make little threats. When that doesn't work the threats will become greater, and include her mom. After that..."

"The shooting starts?" Ed Monroe finished.

"Probably," I said. "Are you ready for where this might lead?"

He shook his head slowly, turning to face me once more, now nodding.

"Yeah. Wouldn't be here if I wasn't. And don't worry. I won't let you down this time. I'm ready."

I stared at him for a few moments and then nodded myself.

"The administrator is onboard with this, all the staff knows that there will be additional security on property around-the-clock for a while. The guards inside have been briefed too. If you need a quick bathroom break, give the desk a call and a guard will meet you at the door. Just make it quick, okay?"

"Will do, boss," he said.

"No need to call me that," I said. "I work very hard not to be anyone's boss."

Ed Monroe smiled and finished his coffee.

"Yes, sir, *Captain*."

I smiled and shook my head, staring out at the darkness once more.

"Smart ass."

Chapter 23

Nothing happened over the weekend. No calls, no drop-bys, and most importantly, no *drive-bys*. I stayed at Nina's place day and night with Sheila backing me up on the perimeter for twelve hours a day. Over at the nursing home Ed Monroe and other members of the Special Services Branch rotated eight hour shifts and they didn't have anything to report other than boredom. I wasn't all that surprised, Innes Redbone might have been a thug but he was not hasty. If he had the time he would take it to consider all his options, and his courses of action. When he was ready he'd call, or he'd send someone; but only when he was ready.

Nina spent most of her time watching TV or doing aerobics in her room, and she read. For my part I paced a lot, and sat some, and read. I had decided not to bring Nietzsche with me, that would just be too much like torture. Maybe one day I'd get back to that book, assuming I survived this job, but I just couldn't take it right now. So after leaving the interview with Rhonie McDavid last Thursday I had gone over to Books-A-Million and stocked up on something much simpler for my addled mind. There was nothing new by Robert B. Parker but I did manage to find a Victor O'Reilly novel that I had been looking for for a while. I got it along with one by Nancy Taylor Rosenberg and another by Stuart Woods. By Saturday night I was nearly halfway through with O'Reilly, and late Sunday I finished it.

Monday morning I woke up at five on the living room sofa. Nina had a spare bedroom but I preferred the sofa out front because I figured if anyone did decide to breach the condo they'd likely come through the front door; and should they do this I intended to greet them properly.

I had slept in a blue sweat suit and on my right hip attached by a Jentra clip was my G-30 .45 caliber compact. On the floor next to the sofa was the Benelli shotgun, and on the coffee table in front of me was the Steyr AUG A-3. A part of me kind of wished somebody did try to get in here, it might be a lot of fun. At least for me.

But thoughts like that aren't all that healthy or helpful so I pushed them from my mind and went to check the condo. Once I was sure everything was still secure, I went back into the living room and did several sets of push-ups and situps and then spent a half hour going through hand-to-hand routines.

I was showered, shaved, and dressed in khaki slacks and a blue pull-over when Nina came out of her bedroom wearing a pink terrycloth robe at a quarter after seven. I was in the kitchen, the coffee already on—for her because I didn't drink the stuff. Breakfast was also in the process. Scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast.

Nina smiled sleepily as she came in, covering her mouth as she yawned.

"Did I hire a bodyguard or a caretaker?" she quipped, moving over to the counter where the coffee pot percolated. "Everything smells great."

She poured herself a cup of coffee and leaned against the sink and sipped while watching me finish breakfast. The eggs were done and in another few seconds the sausage would be ready. The toast popped up and I took all four slices of wheat toast out and put them on a large serving plate, then got low-fat margarine from the refrigerator and spread a small amount over the toast.

Nina was pouring her second cup by the time I had both our plates done. I told her to sit and I served, getting a glass of cranberry juice from the fridge before I joined her.

"This is great," she said after taking in a mouthful. "I don't usually eat breakfast. And nothing as well-prepared. You're a really good cook, Derrick. Surprised no woman has ever claimed you."

I chewed a piece of sausage and then some eggs, washing that down with juice. Nina was staring at me, her fork poised above her food.

"You ever been married?" she asked.

"Nope," I said.

"Ever been close?" she inquired.

"Nope," I replied.

"You don't really like talking about yourself, do you?" she said.

"Nope," I said.

"You want me to shut up?" she said.

Extraction

“Not unless you want to,” I said.

Nina grinned and started in on her breakfast again.

After a few minutes she looked over at me once more.

“I want to thank you again for all of this, Derrick. For everything you’ve done so far. I really appreciate this. I know this is far from over, but I want you to know how much this means to me. I feel so safe with you here, and you having somebody looking after my mom.”

I looked into her eyes for a few moments and then nodded, sipping more juice.

“That’s the job, Nina,” I said simply. “It’s what I do. But as you said, it’s far from over. They aren’t just going to let this go. The sooner you can get out of Birmingham the better off you’ll be; and the farther away the better.”

She nodded and glanced away for a moment.

“I know, and today I’d like to go over and talk to my mom’s doctors again, they’re supposed to be looking into some options for me, some possible places that have comparable care. Will it be alright if I go?”

“Sure,” I said. “I don’t see why not. While we’re gone I’ll have somebody watch this place so we don’t have any surprises waiting when we get back.”

Nina nodded.

We were quite after that, both concentrating on our breakfasts. When we were done I cleaned up the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Nina said she was going to go and shower and get dressed and would call Fairview around nine to see when she could go over. I said okay and went into the living room.

Sheila was due in at eight and I’d brief her on our little road trip. Unless something happened to change the dynamic, this situation could become a routine rut, and that was not good. Routine bred complacency even in the most skilled of operators. However, I got the feeling that Innes Redbone was not likely to let this go on for too much longer.

He just wasn’t that kind of guy.

Chapter 24

Ollie called while we were at Fairview and asked if we'd like to come over to the club for lunch. He and Earl were there going over the books and they had been talking about Nina's situation. Reese was also there and he thought it might be a good opportunity for us all to sit down and talk. I said I'd ask Nina when she came out from her meeting with the doctors, and when she did, I did, and then called Ollie back.

We got to the club at a quarter to one and were let in by one of the large, dark-clad security officers. Reese Tamblyn was standing near the hosting station wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt and she smiled when we came in. Nina and Reese embraced and then Reese reached for me.

"You're in for a treat today folks," Reese said as she took each of us by the arm and led us through to the back of the club. "Earl is cooking lunch, and he is a really wonderful cook. I hope you're hungry."

All the way in the back I could see a large table laid out for five and Ollie was just coming from the side corridor where the kitchen was located. He stopped when he saw us and stood waiting until we approached. This afternoon he was wearing charcoal gray slacks and a black long sleeve button-down silk shirt.

"Hi *yawl* doing?" he drawled. "Reese tell you who cookin' lunch?"

I smiled.

"Yep," I said. "This should be interesting."

Ollie grinned slightly.

"That's one word for it."

"Oh hush you two," Reese cut in. "You know Earl is a good cook."

"Yeah," I told her. "Now. Not always the case though. Remember that time back when we were in high school, Ollie?"

Ollie grinned even more this time, nodding.

"Oh yeah. Boy damn near burned his momma's house down and nearly poisoned us!"

Extraction

We both were laughing and the women looked at us smiling. A few moments later Earl Ashley Dexter, the man in question, came walking out from the kitchen, a full apron covering his front.

“And just what’s so funny?” the proprietor of Club-Dexter inquired, head slightly cocked to one side.

“Oh Derrick and I were just telling the ladies about that time you almost burned Ethel’s house down when we was kids.”

Earl shook his head wearily and turned to Nina and Reese.

“Filthy lies,” he said. “Don’t believe a word they say, ladies, believe me.”

Ollie and I laughed even harder.

“So anyway,” Earl continued undeterred, “it will be just a few minutes more, and in the meantime why doesn’t everybody just sit and open a bottle of wine, get comfortable. Ollie, select something good.”

Ollie nodded and excused himself, heading down the hall to the kitchen. Earl turned to Nina and introduced himself and they shook hands, then he pulled out a chair at the table and she sat. Reese sat down next to her and I took a chair on the opposite side of the table with the wall to my back and a direct view of the front of the empty club. Old habits kept you alive.

Nina thanked Earl for inviting her to lunch and a few moments later he returned to the kitchen to finish with the meal preparations. Ollie came back with a bottle of some sort of wine that he claimed was very good and opened it to let it breathe for a few minutes, then he sat down on the same side of the large table as I had, glancing around him.

“Everybody’s so quiet,” he said. “Not usual for this place, let me tell you.”

Reese smiled and turned to Nina.

“So how is Gloria?” she said.

Nina started to tell her and the two women dropped into a low conversation. I turned to Ollie.

“So far nothing’s happened,” I said. “No calls, no more visits. You been hearing anything on the street?”

Ollie shook his head, placing his elbows on the table and then pressing his fists into the sides of his face.

“Nothin’ so far. Nothin’ ‘bout any hits ordered or anything like that. Sweet Mya Brown is feeling a little put out though, according to what I did hear. She don’t understand why Innes didn’t send somebody right out to take care of you. She mad at him but Innes don’t care. He gonna do this his way. I figure he try to talk to you first. Anybody else he might have moved on them already. With you though he might act like he got some sense. Then maybe he won’t. He know you though. Know you connected to the cops and all. If he can do this without involving them he’d prefer that. But he won’t let this pass, Derrick. Can’t do that and operate the way he be used to. Other bosses would be on his ass if they heard he buckled under.”

I nodded, glancing over at Nina and Reese.

“Yeah, I know. Still the best thing is to get her and her mother out of Birmingham as soon as possible.”

Ollie stared over at Nina for a few moments, then turned toward me and leaned close.

“Still got no idea what it is she ain’t saying?” he whispered.

“Not a clue,” I replied in kind. “And right now there’s nothing to be done about it but sit and wait.”

Ollie nodded again and a few moments later Earl Ashley Dexter returned from the kitchen with a gregarious smile on his face and two servers pushing a large serving cart behind him.

Lunch was served.

And it was fantastic.

I guess he had come along way in twenty-six years.

Hadn’t we all?

Chapter 25

Tuesday morning at nine my cell phone rang and the voice on the other end was not familiar to me. The incoming number was blocked too so I couldn't identify it. The message delivered was simple: Innes Redbone wanted a meeting to resolve the current situation in which we found ourselves. He requested my presence at his place in West End, just me, no one else, and I was to be unarmed. Then the line went dead.

My first call was to Ollie, requesting that both he and Sheila come over right away. They arrived separately about twenty-five and thirty-five minutes later and I filled them in. Sheila thought that I was nuts for even thinking about going to see Innes Redbone alone on his turf, and unarmed. But Ollie saw it differently.

"He knows you ain't stupid," Ollie said. "And he knows you ain't easy to kill. I think if he invite you into his place he ain't gonna try nothin' there. Be too afraid the cops could connect him to it. I say he wanna talk this time. Might not be no mo' talking after this."

I nodded.

"Agreed. I'll go alone. And unarmed. But if this does turn out not to be just a friendly visit..."

Ollie nodded, reaching under his leather jacket and pulling a Remington Super Redhawk .44 magnum revolver from his shoulder rig. He set the weapon on the counter where we were standing and talking.

"They'll bleed for it," he said without emotion. "And I promise you I'll personally drop that fat fuck Innes Redbone. Probably his pet freak Nestor Cabaña too."

I smiled.

"Knew I could count on you, Ollie," I said. "And while I'm gone the two of you will look after Nina. Don't let her take any calls while I'm out either. They may try to persuade her to come back by telling her they'll hurt me

if she doesn't. I'm also having the security at the nursing home put on higher alert for trouble. Just in case."

Ollie nodded.

"We'll take care of it," he said. "What time's the meet?"

"Eleven," I said. "Got a little over an hour. No need to rush. Got one more phone call to make. Another little bit of insurance, just in case."

I stepped away from the counter and pulled my cell phone from my belt.

The line rang three times and then Paige Palmer answered.

"Hey, babe," I said casually. "Something I need to tell you."

Chapter 26

Number 4 Cotton Avenue used to be the location of a thrift store known as the *West Side Outlet*. It had operated for about twenty-seven years and had been a continuing and vital part of the community throughout its existence. I remember once in the early 1990's when I came home on leave my father brought me there on a quest to find something that he was looking for at the time. My dad loved thrift stores, loved finding old things and repairing them if he could. He was a tinkerer and he could always find something he could mess around with in his spare time after he retired. I remember him telling me that the West Side Outlet was among his favorites. That had been right before he got sick.

The thrift store had gone out of business in early 2000 and had remained empty for almost three years before being bought by a local development company with an aim toward starting some kind of revitalization project in the area. This plan eventually fell through when the city wouldn't agree to sell the land that the public housing projects occupied just across the street and relocate the occupants. Subsequently the place was empty for about another year before a less picky investor took over the property.

As I pulled into the empty side parking lot I had a momentary flashback to the last time that I had been here when the place was something else entirely. It made me kind of sad.

I parked on the far side of the parking lot away from the building and sat for a few minutes, glancing in all the mirrors and across the street into the projects. It was quiet this morning, not too many people out. The sun was shining through broken clouds and the temperature was in the lower sixties, forecast high for later on was seventy-one.

I was wearing a light jacket over a white long sleeve button-down shirt and blue jeans. As requested, I was not armed and I felt a little exposed, but not worried. At least not worried a lot. Whatever would happen would happen. Too late to back out now.

I climbed out of the car and looked around some more. In back of the building behind a locked gate were several vehicles parked in a small lot. All expensive looking and all but one an SUV. Innes Redbone liked the flashy, but he had the money so why should he be any different from anybody else?

Another glance around and then I started walking toward the front of the building, taking my time, being casual. Back when this had been a store there were two doors at the front about ten feet apart. One for entry and one for exit. Today there was only one set of double doors in the middle of the front wall, now mostly concrete where once it had been all glass. The doors were solid metal and something told me they would not be easy to break down, say in the event of a police raid. But I didn't have to break them down, I had been invited.

My watch showed the time to be precisely eleven o'clock. I knocked on one of the doors and waited. There was a peephole in both doors and I stood in the center of them about five feet back, hands folded in front of me.

After a minute I heard movement and then the door on the right pushed open, a stocky black man with a shaved head and a full beard stood looking at me with a blank expression. He didn't say anything, just stepped out onto the sidewalk and waited.

I stepped past him and into the building.

The exterior wasn't the only part of the place that had changed since my last visit. Where once everything was out in the open and you could see the entire floor area from almost any point in the building, now there were internal walls and divided spaces. The entryway led into a long corridor that intersected with several others along the way. Standing a few feet inside the door were two more young black men, both neatly dressed, both hard-eyed and cold. They didn't say anything to me but I knew why they were standing and waiting.

I turned to the wall on my left, raised my hands, and waited. One of them patted me down thoroughly and then stepped back, glancing at his partner.

"This way," the partner said, and then started walking down the main corridor without waiting for my reply. I followed and the other man came behind me, but not too close.

Extraction

We turned left at the last intersection and continued on down a shorter corridor. Here we passed several other hard guys, all staring at me with blank expressions. I wondered if maybe these guys all practiced that look together as a group or in front of mirrors on their own. Probably best not to ask.

At the end of the hall was a large set of double doors and in front of them stood two more tough types, both wearing expensive dark suits and giving me the blank stare. My escort stopped in front of the men on the doors and said something I couldn't hear, then stepped back and waited. The one on the left picked up the phone that was mounted on the wall on that side of the door and spoke into it for a couple of moments, then hung up.

He glanced at me contemptuously, looking me up and down, then gave a half smile.

"So you, Olin, huh? Don't look like all that much."

I stared back without expression, feeling totally calm.

He shook his head and moved to open the door behind him, then stepped back out of my way.

I started walking and when I was abreast of the man I briefly turned my head and stared directly into his eyes, continuing on into the office and the door shut behind me.

I was now inside the belly of the beast.

Chapter 27

Sweet Mya Brown was sitting on a beige settee in the right corner of the office, wearing gray today, looking just as beautiful as the last time I'd seen her, despite the scowl.

Seated beside her on the settee was Frankie Burrage, a skinny white guy in his middle twenties who was the only Caucasian in the upper strata of the Redbone organization. Frankie was a quiet little guy who never seemed to be anything, angry, sad, happy, he just was. And he was also very good with a handgun. He was Innes Redbone's number one shooter and he killed efficiently without emotion and without remorse. Despite this, I kind of liked him. Didn't know if he felt the same way about me, probably didn't. I just hoped that one day it wouldn't be necessary for me to kill him. I wouldn't like that very much. But I'd do it in a heartbeat if necessary because I'd really hate it if he killed me instead.

The very large black specimen of maleness leaning against the left wall of the office was another subject entirely. I would gladly, gleefully kill that son of a bitch, and probably should have before now. Nestor Cabaña was about a year or so younger than me. He was six-two, about two hundred fifty pounds of solid muscle, and he was also a brutal and sadistic bastard who took great pleasure in hurting people. This was probably the reason that he had gotten into his line of work. He liked it a lot, had been with Innes Redbone for a long time, and today he served as chief enforcer to Birmingham's self-described *Godfather of Crime*. There was no attempt on his part to hide his hatred for me.

In return I gave him a warm smile and that made his face turn colder, if that was possible.

Then I turned my attention to the man himself, Innes Redbone. To say that he was a large man was to do discredit to that word. Rotund, corpulent, or maybe just way too *fucking* fat. He had to be at least three fifty, and

Extraction

barely five-nine, if that. How on Earth Sweet Mya Brown or any woman could ever... I had to put that thought out of my mind, less I throw up.

Redbone had on an expensive cherry red three piece suit that had to have been specially tailored. That was the only way he would ever get anything that would fit him properly. Even so, he still looked like a mess, his several chins rolling over the collar of his expensive shirt and onto his stripped tie. The money spent on his wardrobe could probably have been better spent feeding and clothing school kids from lower income families all across the state. Perhaps the region. The suit Redbone had on now could probably have clothed and fed an entire second grade class for a year.

“Derrick Olin,” the thug-in-chief said in a wispy voice that was not easy to discern. Someone had once told me that his throat had been cut some years ago when Innes was a much younger man and he had never fully recovered the use of his voice. Too bad the cutting had not been more thorough.

“Innes,” I said.

“Take a seat,” he said, indicating the single wooden chair in front of the desk. Something told me that it had been brought in just for me. It looked uncomfortable and unsteady and totally out of character with the rest of the office. I nodded and sat carefully. To my surprise the chair actually held me, but it was definitely not comfortable. No matter, I had been in worse.

“Thank you,” I said, glancing around. “So how have you been, Innes?”

Redbone smiled, scratching one of his chins with his right index finger as he shifted his considerable bulk and leaned back, the chair’s springs groaning under the pressure of his enormous weight.

“Can’t complain too much,” he responded. “Business has been pretty good lately. For the most part.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. “Good business for you means bad things for somebody else.”

Redbone smiled and looked over at his chief enforcer, then back at me.

“Somebody’s got to lose if somebody’s gonna win, Derrick,” he said.

“That’s what they tell me,” I said.

“And they right. Now suppose you tell me why you in this with Mya’s girl?”

Straight to business, good.

I shifted on the chair and looked over at Sweet Mya Brown for a moment, and glanced at Frankie Burrage. He nodded back at me, not friendly, but not hostile either. Then I refocused on the fat man behind the desk.

“It’s simple really, Innes,” I said. “Nina Neetor no longer wants to work for your organization. She wants out. After that trick beat her up a couple weeks back I can’t say that I blame her.”

“She a *ho*,” Redbone said. “Sometimes things get rough. She make good money, and we took care of her doctor stuff. The price of doin’ business. Ain’t the first time she been beat up, what’s so special this time?”

“Could be she’s tired of getting beaten up, Innes,” I offered.

He shook his large head and glanced over at Sweet Mya Brown.

“Ho’s like gettin’ beat up,” he said. “They just say they don’t, but they really do, ain’t that right, *Sweet Mya*?”

She smiled at him and nodded.

“Sho’ right, baby. You sho’ right.”

Redbone laughed and so did Sweet Mya Brown. Frankie Burrage continued to look neutral and Nestor Cabaña continued to scowl at me.

“She a part of my organization, Derrick,” the mob boss said to me after a minute. “She work for Mya but she work for me too. And you know I can’t let her do this. She can’t just leave. She know better than that. And so should you. You ain’t no rookie here, you know how this work.”

Redbone paused and scratched his left ear for a moment before continuing.

“Now because it’s you I decided not to send Nestor or Frankie right over to cut your heart out. Anybody else I put in the ground right off. But you ain’t so easy. Not that I can’t or won’t do it. But you might be more trouble than it worth. So I invite you here to tell you that if this bitch come back then I’ll let it go. She won’t get hurt and everything else will be forgotten.”

“She won’t be hurt, huh?” I said.

Innes smiled again, something truly nasty to see.

Extraction

“Not much,” he finally said. “And she will be alive, and able to work. She one of Mya’s top gals. Johns really like her. I understand she a real freak, do all sorts of *things* that the men like. She worth a lot to the operation so we’ll keep her healthy. Yeah, sure, she gonna pay for this a little. I’ll make sure they don’t mark her up too much, and nobody will touch her momma.”

“Nobody’s gonna touch her momma now, Innes,” I replied coldly, looking directly into his dark eyes. “Or her. She wants out and I’m going to get her out. The reason I came here today was to tell you that it would be much simpler for all concerned if you just backed off, cut your losses now. She’s one woman, you’ve got scores more, you won’t miss her. But if you push this, you know me. You know the trouble I can cause. And I’m not just talking about the cops. You know how I operate. You start pushing and I’ll have to start pushing back; and I won’t be too particular about who gets hurt in the process.”

Frankie Burrage’s expression did not alter.

Sweet Mya Brown’s eyes widened because she could not believe that anyone would be so bold—or stupid—as to talk to Innes Redbone like that, and still be breathing seconds after doing it.

Nestor Cabaña pushed off the wall and took a step toward me.

Innes Redbone held up a hand to his chief enforcer and then he chuckled, shaking his fat head.

“You don’t give an inch, do you, Derrick?” he said, pushing up in his chair and leaning his bulk across the back of his desk. “A hard man to the last. You know if I snap my fingers Nestor will take you apart. And if he can’t, Frankie will shoot you dead. You know how fast he is. But you sit here and give me shit like you ain’t in the middle of my house and unarmed. I know you got people out there, people with that ho right now, and you got the cops on your side. But in here you be just as dead and none of that won’t matter.”

I nodded.

“True,” I said. “But I don’t think you want that kind of trouble. Which is why I’m asking you to back off of Nina Neetor, let her go, save yourself the aggravation.”

Innes Redbone stared into my eyes for a long time, never blinking. I returned the favor. After a few minutes he pushed back once more and glanced over at Sweet Mya Brown.

“Baby, you might have to do without your girl after all,” he said slowly. “Oh, I ain’t lettin’ her go.” Then he glanced back at me. “But I might have to kill her. That all, Derrick. You change your mind, give me a call. Nestor, get the door, have the boys show him out. And don’t touch him.”

Nestor Cabaña stood and glared down at me for a few moments more before he looked away and went over and opened the door. He spoke to one of the men out in the hall then stood against the door and waited until I stood up.

I stared at Innes Redbone for a few seconds, briefly glancing over at Sweet Mya Brown one more time. Gorgeous.

“Frankie,” I said to the ace shooter.

He nodded.

“Derrick,” he said.

I turned and walked out, smiling briefly at Nestor Cabaña as I passed him. If looks could kill...

I was back in my car out in the parking lot by a quarter to twelve and breathing easy once more. Despite the fact that I seemed totally calm and in control while I had been inside Redbone’s headquarters, I have to admit that I had been a little apprehensive; and not all that sure I was going to make it out in one piece. But I had.

I started up my car and glanced off to the left. At the intersection of Cotton Avenue and 2nd Street SW an unmarked dark blue cruiser was just making the turn. It passed by me without slowing but I could make out the driver’s familiar profile and I smiled, reaching for my seatbelt.

“Well looks like I wasn’t so alone after all,” I said, then backed out and moved toward the lot’s rear exit, following the unmarked police car.

Chapter 28

I followed Paige Palmer for a little less than a mile until she turned into the lot of the *Burger King* at the corner of 8th Street SW and 3rd Avenue West. She parked on the 8th Street side and got out. I parked in a space two down from her and climbed out as well. I could tell by the expression on her face, despite the shades covering her eyes, that she was not happy.

She walked over to me and leaned against the car that was parked next to mine, folding her arms across her chest, her light brown blazer bunching at the shoulders.

“Well you’re still in one piece so I guess that’s good,” she said.

I smiled.

“I’d say that’s very good, love,” I replied.

“You aren’t funny, Derrick,” Paige said with irritation in her voice. “You want to tell me just what the hell you were doing in there? You call me and tell me that you have to go see Innes Redbone but you don’t tell me why. You say if something should happen to you Ollie will be getting in touch and telling me some things, and that I should do everything I can to make life really bad for Innes and his crowd. What do you think I am, your personal police servant?”

I took a breath and paused before responding, deciding against being flippant, as much as I wanted to be.

“Paige, I appreciate that you’re upset. And a little angry. I’m working on something now and it involves Redbone, through his chief madam, Sweet Mya Brown. I had to go see him today and just wanted to make sure if something happened to me he paid for it. Both through the law and by *other* means.”

She scowled.

“You mean through Ollie? You know he’s little better than Redbone. I know what he used to do in Detroit. Don’t think I haven’t checked him out. He used to be a top enforcer in the underworld up there until a citywide mob

war damn near got him killed. I know he's still got his hand in some of that stuff."

"Ollie's complicated, Paige," I said. "But he's okay. I trust him."

She continued to stare at me for about a minute, then pulled off her shades and took a deep breath.

"You scared the shit out of me today, Derrick," Paige said after a while. "When I got that call I wasn't sure what to make of it. I didn't know exactly what you were planning, and I wanted to back you up if I could. We do surveillance on Redbone's shop from time to time, been trying to get a wire in there for over a year, and after you called I decided to put a team over there quick, lead it myself. One of the perks with being a lead detective. Anyway, if you hadn't come out after a while I was probably gonna do something really stupid and possibly career ending."

I smiled and nodded.

"I appreciate the thought," I said. "Glad it wasn't necessary."

"Me too," she said, pushing off the car and lowering her arms to her sides. "Now do you suppose you can tell me just what the hell is actually going on?"

I glanced over at the restaurant and next at my watch.

"It's lunch time," I told Paige. "What's say I treat?"

She stood silently for several moments before sighing, smiling reluctantly, and shaking her head.

"Why the hell not?" she said.

I took her by the arm and led her through the side entrance.

Chapter 29

Paige ordered a chicken sandwich and a side salad and I had a double whopper and onion rings and we got a table in the back near the restrooms. The lunch crowd was beginning to pick up and in a little while the place would probably be full. For the moment the two tables closest to us were empty. I sat with my back to the wall and Paige with hers to the windows overlooking the parking lot on this side.

“So let me get this straight,” Paige said after swallowing a large sip of her coke. “You’ve taken on a hooker as a client and she happens to be in the stable of the girlfriend of the biggest criminal in the metro area? And she wants you to get her out of that stable and keep her and her mother alive, but she’s not ready to leave town yet? That about it?”

“More or less,” I said, sipping my lemonade.

“Then she’s a fool,” Paige said. “Crossing Innes Redbone like this is not a smart thing to do, and staying in town afterwards—hell maybe even the state—is really dumb. I understand about her mom but maybe she ought to think about getting out anyway.”

I nodded, setting my cup down and picking up the remains of my sandwich.

“Yeah, we’ve talked about that. That’s the direction I’m pushing her in because I think it will only be a matter of time before Innes does something. He came out and pretty much said he’d kill her if she didn’t come back.”

Paige shook her head.

“And you know he’s serious. I really wish I could get something to nail that fucker on, put his ass away once and for all. And everybody else associated with him. Cabaña, his head whore Mya Brown, and that little bastard Frankie Burrage too. No telling how many people he’s personally put in the ground. Derrick, I don’t have to tell you how dangerous this is. I know you’ve tangled with some bad dudes in the past—some *very* bad dudes—but

Innes Redbone has a lot of guns on his payroll, and I hate to say it, probably some people in my own department. If you go to war with him over this hooker you might not come out on the winning side. I know how you are when you set your mind to something, but maybe this time you should reconsider.”

I took a bite of my sandwich and chewed, swallowing slowly, staring across the table at Paige the entire time. When I was done I put the whopper back down and wiped my hands with a napkin.

“If only I could, lover,” I said. “But I can’t. I signed on and I have to see it through to the end. Whatever that is. However, I would like your help with something if I could impose further?”

Paige pushed her salad away and folded her hands on the back of the table.

“What?”

“My client,” I said. “Remember the Lionel Grayson thing I was involved with a while back when I was protecting that writer, Evan Cross?”

Paige nodded.

“Sure,” she said. “Grayson ended up dead as I recall. Still an open homicide. Also, if I recall correctly, he was somehow mixed up with Innes Redbone but we could never prove it.”

“Right,” I told her. “You remember when I had you run a background check on the woman I saw with Grayson at that reception my client attended with his boyfriend, Conrad Grayson, Lionel’s son?”

“Sure,” she said. “Can’t think of her name right now, but I know she worked for Sweet Mya Brown. Got her picture off the surveillance... *Christ* almighty! She’s your client now! That’s the hooker, *isn’t* it?”

I nodded.

“You are a good detective, Paige.”

Paige Palmer shook her head incredulously.

“You aren’t serious, Derrick? You’re working for her? What’s her name?”

“Nina Neetor,” I said.

“Yeah, I remember now,” Paige said. “High-class whore on Mya Brown’s book. Got busted a couple of times and she bailed her out. She’s how you knew Grayson was connected to Redbone. God, Derrick, how the hell did

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you get involved in this? For all you know this woman had something to do with getting Lionel Grayson killed.”

“Lionel Grayson got himself killed, Paige,” I told her. “He’s the one who got involved with Redbone and in the end it came back and bit his head off. I doubt seriously if Nina had anything to do with his murder, although I’m pretty sure Innes Redbone did. But that aside, she is my client now and I intend to help her. However, I believe she’s holding something back, and I need to know what it is. I think there is another reason she isn’t ready to leave Birmingham yet. Something she wants to keep secret. I was hoping you could do another background on her, this time deeper and more thorough, see what you can come up with.”

“And you don’t even trust the bitch,” Paige said in a harsh whisper, leaning across the table toward me as another couple came and sat at one of the two empty tables near us. “Shouldn’t that tell you something? If you don’t trust her then maybe she should find another bodyguard.”

“People hold things back for all sorts of reasons, Paige. You know that. As a cop you know that just because a suspect lies to you doesn’t mean she committed the crime you’re investigating. And just because my client is holding something back, perhaps even lying about something, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t need my help. I just like to have all the information available if I can. So will you help me?”

Paige sat back, continuing to shake her head slowly. She glanced around the restaurant for a minute and then back at me, her expression set in stone.

“How’s she paying you?” she said suddenly.

I chuckled.

“She is a beautiful woman, Paige,” I said. “But too young, and a client. Besides, I like my blondes in their mid-forties, divorced, with four kids, and possessing absolutely no shame when it comes to... Well I’m sure you know what I mean.”

Paige Palmer continued to stare at me hard for maybe a minute, and then the smile started to seep through. Finally she shook her head again and leaned forward.

“You’re gonna owe me big for this one, Mister,” Paige remarked coolly. “And remember, I don’t take personal checks.”

“I know,” I said. “And don’t worry, I’ll think of some *appropriate* form of payment.”

Paige grinned.

“You better. Tell me exactly what you want me to do.”

I leaned forward with my elbows on the table and did just that.

Chapter 30

Sheila called at eight Wednesday night to tell me that she was heading out and that the perimeter looked fine, no one suspicious anywhere—except for her. I thanked her and told her I'd see her in the morning. Nina and I were in her kitchen finishing dinner. She had gone to visit her mother again today and had talked to the doctors once more. They had found several good nursing homes out west that could offer the type of care that Gloria Sandborne required, however they were much more expensive than Fairview, and Nina wasn't sure she could swing it if she didn't have a lot of money coming in.

"I just don't know, Derrick," she said, sipping her coffee. "Even to get her out there would cost a fortune. I'd have to have a doctor and nurse travel with us, and she can't be flown. That means a ground medical transport. That would be a least fifty thousand right off the top. I could sell this place I suppose, use my savings, but then what would we do once we were out there? I don't have a job right now, although I'm sure I could find something. Maybe even work as an escort just for a little while if I had to; and hopefully find somebody better than Mya to work for."

I didn't comment. If she wanted to keep turning tricks somewhere else what did it really matter to me? It wasn't my job to judge her life and employment choices, I just had to safely extract her from her present situation so she could move into her next one. If she fucked that up then it would be somebody else's job to care.

I sipped my herbal tea and thought about the half-finished Nancy Taylor Rosenberg book on the coffee table in the living room. Maybe tonight I'd finish it.

Nina asked if I wanted anything else and I told her no, I was full. She nodded and stood up, collecting the dishes and putting them in the sink. I finished my tea and got up, taking it over to the sink. She turned to me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"I know I'm a mess, Derrick," she said in a weary voice, her eyes on level with my own. "And I thank you for putting up with me."

I nodded, and then my cell phone rang.

"Excuse me," I said to Nina, taking the phone off my belt. "Hello?"

"It's me," Sheila said through the earpiece. "I was just going past that Chinese place, *Ming's* out on Cahaba Park Circle across from the Baymont, when I spotted this Chevy Sedan with four guys in it. I recognize the driver. Name Dedrick Cutts. He a shooter for Nestor Cabaña. I'm bettin' the rest of them the same. I U-turned and coming back now. They maybe thirty seconds ahead of me."

"Got it," I said. "Be careful."

The line went dead and I put my phone back on my belt after switching it to vibrate. Nina was staring at me and she could tell by the change in my manner that something was happening.

"What is it?" she said.

"No time to explain," I said, taking her by the right arm and leading her from the kitchen and down the hallway to the spare bedroom. "Time to do what I told you to in the case of an emergency, okay?"

I could tell she wanted to ask questions but remembered that that was the first thing I had covered in my *emergency action* briefing at the start of the job. No questions, just do what you're told. We went over to the closet in the far corner and I told her to get inside and lie down on the floor. She looked into my eyes, terror rising in hers, but then she did as she was told. Once she was down on her side with her long legs curled up in the fetal position I covered her with a dark blanket and stacked suitcases in front of her. After I was done I closed the closet door then moved quickly out of the room, shutting that door as well.

My duffel was on the floor behind the sofa in the living room and I went to it quickly, reaching inside and taking out the Benelli shotgun and the Steyr AUG A-3. I also pulled out a Spectra-Shield bullet-resistant vest and slipped it on over my shirt, tightening the adjustable straps as I knelt behind the sofa and watched the front door.

Chances were good that the shooters who were probably now on the way up weren't highly trained professional assassins who knew anything about covert entry, diversions, or lures. Nope, more than likely all four of

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them would walk right up to the front door, kick it in, and then start shooting. They might leave one behind to cover their escape, maybe wait down in the car. Then again maybe they wouldn't.

You never knew with punks and amateurs. They were rather unpredictable.

There was already a round in the chamber of the shotgun and one in the A-3's as well. Safeties off.

The A-3 I left on the floor behind the sofa and moved back down the hall toward the kitchen, lying on the floor with my lower body in the other room and the top half outside with the shotgun pointing toward the front door.

The condo was on the second level and my initial inspection of the grounds revealed that it would not be an easy thing to climb up from the back. They could always go up on the roof and come down that way but that would require effort and imagination, and a rope. No, I didn't think these guys were that adventurous. Still, you never wanted to underestimate your opposition, so I did make sure I could spin around and take cover in the event someone came through a back window.

The precaution was unnecessary as it turned out. A minute after I positioned myself down the hallway the front door of the condo shuddered under a heavy impact, like a body slamming into it. But the door and the locks were good, and they held. A couple of seconds later another impact. The door frame started to split but the door itself continued to hold. There was cursing from the corridor outside and then a shotgun blast took the door-knob off. The door was kicked in without further resistance at that point and a young black man wearing a black hooded sweatshirt and carrying a sawed off pump-action shotgun stepped inside, looking all around, dropping into a sloppy crouch.

I shot him in the middle of the chest and he was knocked backwards into the next man who was about to enter the room.

More shouts and cussing, and then I saw a handgun come from the right side of the door and start to fire wildly. The shots were too high so I didn't bother to reposition, simply aimed the Benelli once more and squeezed the trigger. The gun and the hand disappeared, leaving a spray of gore on the door jamb and more screaming in the hall.

A moment later another young black man wearing a hoodie leaped into the doorway, this one carrying a submachine gun in a two-handed grip. He started yelling and firing at the same time and his rounds went everywhere. Apparently he didn't know how to handle the weapon very efficiently and most of the shots went into the upper portion of the wall and the ceiling. I shot him in the knees and he fell to the floor howling and rolling around. But just as he went down another shooter took his place, this one with a shotgun, and he was aiming low.

I just managed to roll back into the kitchen before the floor where I had been just a moment before was ripped up by buckshot. I bumped into one of the kitchen chairs as I rolled and knocked it over on top of me.

Quickly shoving the chair out of the way, I slid the shotgun against the sink cabinet and reached to my hip and pulled out the G-30. Out in the hall I heard someone moving my way fast and scurried back toward the dishwasher on the other side of the table.

A head poked into the kitchen doorway for a brief instant and then disappeared. Then the shotgun came in and started firing. It was a self-loader like the Benelli, which meant nothing had to be cocked or pumped.

Glass burst over my head, wood splintered, metal clanged, but I was shielded by the table, and there are only so many rounds in a shotgun. Most civilian autoloaders only hold five. A few hold six. Apparently this one held five because the shooter stopped firing after four, having already spent one round while still in the front doorway. Of course, he could simply be waiting for me to make a move and nail me with whatever he had left.

Full auto fire sounded from the front of the condo and I heard an impact against the wall opposite the kitchen, then an even louder one on the floor inside. Looking under the table I saw the bloody and distorted face of the man I'd seen holding the shotgun. A Smith & Wesson nine millimeter pistol lay just to the right of his left hand. That hand twitched once and then was still.

I stood up and carefully moved around to the other side of the table, my Glock in a two-handed grip, covering the kitchen doorway. Kneeling down I checked the man on the floor for a pulse. At first I thought I felt a faint one, and then nothing. I shoved the discarded pistol across the floor under the table and stood up, easing to the door.

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"Sheila!" I called.

"I'm here!" she called back. "Got that fella who was standing outside the kitchen there. Two others down out here. A fourth was coming out when I was coming up. His hand was blown off. It was Dedrick Cutts. I cold-cocked him."

"Then that's it," I said, stepping into the hall and seeing her standing over the two other men I had shot, covering them with her ever-present MAC-11. A small but deadly package.

"Four is all I saw in the car," Sheila said, glancing at me. "Didn't see nobody else."

I nodded.

"Alright. The one I shot in the legs is probably still alive, but he's not going anywhere. Make sure you collect their weapons and then take off. I know the cops are on the way. I'll square this with them. If you would, take a quick trip over to the nursing home and check on things. I'm gonna call the guard on duty there to see if they had any visitors."

"Sure," Sheila said, letting her weapon swing free on the rig under her jacket. Then she went to work collecting weapons.

"And, young lady," I said.

She paused and looked over at me.

"Yes, sir?"

"Thank you," I said.

The little shooter grinned.

"It's what I do, sir," she said simply and then got on with her task.

It is indeed, I thought, turning and heading down the hall to check on Nina. No doubt she was scared out of her wits right now. Maybe she would be ready to get the hell out of Birmingham after all this. Dead bodies on the floor of your home tended to make a convincing argument.

Chapter 31

The police showed up shortly after Sheila left, and once they determined that all the hostiles were down they secured the area, called for the medics, and then started looking for additional casualties, and questioning witnesses.

I had gotten Nina out of the closet before the cops came and took her into her bedroom. She was shaking uncontrollably and I had to carry her most of the way, putting her on the bed and trying to reassure her as best I could, all the while keeping an eye out just in case someone else showed up who wasn't a cop.

It took a little convincing, and the surrendering of my Glock, before the cops would accept that I wasn't a bad guy. I explained who I was, dropped a few names of cops I knew, Paige Palmer included, and then the first supervisor on the scene made a call to a detective in Homicide that I had mentioned. That detective vouched for me, said that I was *alright*. Whatever that means.

The medics came, along with the coroner because there were two dead bodies to be hauled away. There were a lot of frightened people in the building but the cops had checked with everyone and determined that no one else had been injured. Apparently the interior walls and ceilings had steel sheeting in their centers to contain noise and this had prevented wildly fired rounds from penetrating them on the other side. I was glad of that.

Once the wounded were taken care of I asked a medic to come in and check on Nina and she did, determining that she wasn't harmed physically but that she was in shock. That I already knew. I thanked the EMT and she went out.

Detectives arrived within a half hour and they took over the questioning. I told them some things but not others and I knew they weren't satisfied, but since one of the cops recognized one of the dead shooters—and seemed rather happy he was dead—they backed off somewhat and didn't push

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too hard. Besides, they still had two alive to question whenever their conditions stabilized.

The condo was a mess and I knew Nina did not want to stay there that night, so after the cops and everyone else cleared out around one in the morning and all the neighbors went back into their units to try to get some sleep, I told Nina to pack a bag. She was a bit steadier now and did what I told her.

I had asked that a patrol car be left in the lot for another half hour and when Nina and I came out there were two, one the supervisor's car. The cops sat and watched as we climbed into my car and I pulled out of the lot, heading down Cahaba Forest Cove to Cahaba Park Circle and onto Highway 280.

I did not plan a far trip, turning left at the intersection and driving for just two hundred yards before turning right onto Cahaba River Road, heading west. From that direction there was only one way to turn and that was onto Key Drive and I did so, slowing down as I passed over several speed bumps, and there was my destination: The Fairfield Inn.

I'd already called and reserved a double room and the sleepy night auditor didn't pay us any attention as I paid in cash and took the key. The room was on the third floor in the back and Nina carried her bag as I carried my duffel.

Once inside the room I secured the door and put a chair against it. Nina had gone over to the far bed and sat down on the front end. I turned and found her hugging herself fiercely, shaking.

Truth be told, right now my hands were trembling a little too. The after-effects of a massive adrenaline rush. No matter how many times I went through battle, the end results were still the same.

I took a deep breath and released it, closing my eyes momentarily, and then opening them once more, squeezing my hands closed and opening them several times. Still a little tremble, but I was much better off than my client.

I went over to the bed and sat down next to her, slipping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her to me. I could feel her heart beating against her ribcage like a herd of stampeding thoroughbreds.

Suddenly I couldn't feel my own trembles anymore.

Absently I was wondering what Innes Redbone would do when he found out that his kill team had failed. Probably send another one. Which meant I had to put her some place he didn't know about. At least for a little while. I'd have to give that some thought during the night.

I'd also have to give some thought to how I was going to dissuade Innes from doing something like this again.

Antiterrorism 101: *The Tactics of Discouragement*. When the opposition did something to you, you had to do something to them that was even worse, more costly, and let them know that every time they struck out against you, you would strike back even harder against them. An insane strategy to be sure, but sometimes quite effective; and one of the many reasons I was no longer a U.S. government agent.

However, when dealing with someone like Innes Redbone, you had to get a little insane sometimes. Maybe even more than a little.

Nina slipped her arms around my neck and squeezed tightly.

"I was so scared," she whispered in my left ear. "I thought... I thought I was going to be killed."

Me too, I thought to myself.

"You're okay," I said to her. "You're just fine and you're safe now."

Now being the operative word in that statement.

I didn't know about the future.

One thing at a time.

Chapter 32

Paige called and woke me at four a.m. after a detective in her squad on the night desk got word of the shootout at Nina's place. The detective knew that Paige and I were friends and thought she would want to know right away. I kind of wished that there had been more of a delay. At least until after I could get a little more sleep.

I managed to convince Paige that I was alright and so was Nina, although I don't really think she cared that much about Nina's welfare. Paige wanted to know where I was so she could come right over but I finally convinced her not to come out in the middle of the night—actually early morning. Nina had just gotten to sleep a little while before and I could use a couple more hours myself. Reluctantly she agreed.

At seven a.m. Paige Palmer and I were sitting in her unmarked cruiser in the back lot of the Fairfield Inn. I had gotten Sheila to come on an hour early and now she was upstairs waiting in the hallway outside the room Nina and I were temporarily sharing.

Paige had bought a large cup of coffee from a McDonald's close by and was sipping it as I told her about last night. Her expression was neutral but I had a pretty good idea what she was thinking, and knew she was not happy in the least.

"And that's about it," I concluded, glancing out the window on the passenger's side of the Ford. "They came, they kicked the door in after several tries, and then I shot them. Really not much to it."

Paige turned in her seat and stared at me.

"Don't be a smart ass, Derrick," she said harshly. "I know full well that you were not alone last night. And so do the cops who were on the scene. They know what weapons you had available, which ones were fired. Bullets in at least one of the dead guys won't match any of your guns. Who was it, Ollie? Or maybe it was that little girl with the MAC-11 who helped us out on that Evan Cross thing?"

I didn't respond.

Paige sighed and took another sip of her coffee.

"Yeah," she said. "What I figured. Well you don't really have to worry. The detective in charge of the investigation is a friend and he doesn't really care too much who was backing you up. He knows at least two of the shooters, real bad guys. He's glad somebody took them down. Still got two in the hospital, one in a coma, the other under heavy sedation. Can't question them yet but even when we can we don't figure to get much. We know who they ultimately work for but will never be able to prove it; and they won't talk."

"Probably not," I said. "They'd die for sure and they know it."

"So you've managed to get the biggest thug in town pissed at you again," Paige said. "And all for a high-priced *whore*. You know this is only the beginning. Redbone has got reams of guys with guns who will be only too happy to come after you. No matter how many you kill, they'll still keep coming. Eventually they will get lucky, no matter how good you are. Or how good that little SMG-toting friend of Ollie's is. You should get her out of town now, Derrick, away from here and away from you. The last thing this city needs right now is an all-out war with blood and bodies on the streets. We've already got enough problems with the crime stats as it is. This is only going to make things worse."

I stared into Paige's harsh brown eyes for a moment. I knew she was saying the things that she was saying to me because she was concerned for me. She was my friend and occasional lover and she didn't want me to get hurt. I appreciated that, but I also had a responsibility to a client. An obligation that I just could not walk away from even if I wanted to.

Still, Paige was right, it would be better if Nina agreed to split town now. It might take the heat off of her, but I got the feeling that it was going to remain on me no matter what. I had challenged Innes Redbone, bloodied his nose, embarrassed him in front of his people. There was no way that he was going to simply let that go. His ego was at stake; and his reputation.

Not that I really gave a damn. In my other life I had dealt with people a lot more scary and dangerous than that fat clown, and I was still here. If need be I could take him out; and Nestor Cabaña. Even Frankie Burrage if I had to. Maybe I'd do just that. Maybe it was time somebody took on and put

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the Redbone organization out of business. The cops and feds had been trying for years with no success. That was because they had to follow the rules and the laws. I was a private citizen now. The only rules that I had to follow were my own. Maybe it was time for me to remember that, and act accordingly.

I reached out and took Paige's hand, squeezing gently.

"I'm gonna have a talk with her as soon as we're done here, see where her head is at. She was terrified after last night and that will probably make her more amenable to leaving. Her mother might have to stay a while longer but we'll protect her at the nursing home. If Nina agrees to leave that should take some of the pressure off."

"But what about you?" Paige said. "You've pissed Redbone off now. You're in his sights. If he can't get to her he still might come after you."

I nodded.

"A possibility," I said. "But there isn't much I can do about that at the moment. And I can take care of myself, as you well know."

Paige gave a half-felt smile.

"Over the past couple of years somebody has tried to kill you at your home twice.⁶ I'm amazed the other tenants haven't had you kicked out yet. If it happens again..."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Actually I was looking at other places a few months back before I went down to Orlando on that job for Leigh Danton's brother.⁷ When I came back I sort of put the effort on the shelf. Maybe I'll start looking again once this is over. Might have to."

Paige shook her head and pulled her hand from mine.

"Derrick, I just don't understand you sometimes, I really don't. You know I like you, and I don't want anything to happen to you, but sometimes I think you do this stuff deliberately. Put yourself in dangerous situations that could be avoided. Like maybe you're trying to get yourself hurt. It worries me about you. You didn't have to get involved in this case and you certainly didn't have to agree to let your client stay in her own home knowing what was coming, but you did. And you got what you had to know was going to happen:

⁶ See *Criminal* and *Vicious* by Stellen Qxz

⁷ See *Deadline* by Stellen Qxz

a gun battle and dead bodies. You were lucky not to have been hurt, but you could just as easily have been killed. Does that even matter to you?"

Not really, I thought. Life, death, all the same to me. I'm not one of those people who believe that life is too short. I see it the other way around. Life is entirely *too* long. But that said, I'm in no hurry to *shuffle off this mortal coil*.

I took her hand in mine once more, looking directly into her eyes.

"I don't have a death wish, love," I said gently. "Just a job to do. That's all. And I am very good at it."

She stared back at me for a minute and then pulled her hand free once more.

"So far," she said, finishing her coffee and setting the empty cup on the dash behind the steering wheel. "Let's just hope it stays that way. Oh, and I should tell you that I haven't been able to do what you asked regarding your client yet, been busy with some other stuff. But this morning I will make time. Might take a while though. You still want me to do it even though she might be more inclined to leave town now?"

"Yes, please," I told her. "I'd like that information regardless."

Paige nodded.

"Okay."

"Thanks, Paige," I said, reaching over and squeezing her knee. "I really appreciate this."

She looked over at me, sadness and rising anger in her eyes.

"Just be careful, Derrick. And get her to get the hell out of Birmingham as soon as you can."

I nodded.

"Talk to you later."

I climbed out of the car and watched as Paige backed out of the space and headed around toward the front of the hotel and the exit.

Eight a.m.

Time to go have a serious talk with my client.

Chapter 33

Nina was just coming out of the shower when I returned to our room. She had on a dark blue robe and was using one of the hotel towels to dry her still damp hair. Some of the color had returned to her face this morning and she managed a brief smile as she moved to the mirror over the dresser and continued to run the towel through her hair.

“That shower was just what I needed,” she said, staring at me through the mirror. “I feel really refreshed. Could have used a little more sleep though. Did you talk to your police friend?”

I nodded, moving over to the bed I had slept on and sitting on the front edge, staring up at my client. For just a brief instant I had to remind myself that she *was* my client and not just a beautiful woman who was standing a few feet away from me drying her hair and wearing nothing but a bathrobe.

Not such an easy feat in the presence of the statuesque Nina Neetor, but I am a man of iron will and a clean heart. For the most part.

“The cops know it was Innes Redbone behind the shooters,” I told her. “But they won’t be able to prove it. Two of them are dead and the other two are in no condition to talk. And even when they are they aren’t gonna give up Innes.”

Nina nodded, lowering the towel and running the fingers of her left hand through her hair.

“So they won’t be able to help?” she said. “About what I figured. He is such a powerful man, and dangerous. I knew he and Mya would not be happy about my leaving, but I just can’t believe they would do something like this. To send armed men to my home to kill me.”

“They might not have had an intention to kill you,” I said. “That might have been for me. If they could get past me and get you, they might have intended to extract you and take you to Innes. Although I think he would probably kill you without much thought and no regrets, I think he’d

rather have you back in Mya's stable and able to work. Make an example out of you for the other girls. He'd hurt you, sure, but he might be willing to let you live."

Nina turned to face me.

"If you could call that living," she said. "It would be worse for me now than before."

"Yeah," I agreed. "No doubt. Which is why I'm going to recommend that you leave town sooner rather than later, Nina. They will try again, believe that. And next time they might get lucky. Or the time after that."

She stood quietly and stared at me for a long time, the towel still hanging from her right hand, touching the floor.

"But my mom, Derrick," she said with a frown. "I can't leave my mom."

"Nina, your mom is probably easier to protect than you are," I told her. "And besides, they don't really want her; she's a means to you. If you're out of their reach they might forget about her. But even if they don't it would still be easier to provide protection for her at Fairview at least until you can work something else out. If you stay here, no matter where you hide, eventually they will find you. Innes Redbone has eyes and ears all over this town. No doubt cops on the payroll too. Sooner or later he will find you. I can delay it, make it more costly for him, but eventually the odds go in his favor."

More silence and more staring. Then she came over and sat on the bed next to me, just a little bit too close, but I didn't move.

"They're going to kill me, aren't they?" she said in a dejected voice. "They're going to kill me and my mom and there's nothing that anybody can do about it."

I shook my head and blew air out through my closed lips.

"Not if I can help it," I told her. "But it would be a lot easier if you left town, Nina."

She turned to me and looked deeply into my eyes.

"Will you protect me regardless of what my decision is?" she said.

Absolutely not, I thought. *No way*, if you don't agree to leave town immediately then I'm packing it in and calling it a day.

That's what I should have said, but I can be a real idiot some days. Maybe Paige was right about my death wish.

Extraction

“Sure,” I told her. “I’ll do my best.”

Nina smiled and leaned over to kiss me on the cheek.

I saw that coming and should have made an effort to avoid it.

Like I said, I can be an idiot sometimes.

Nina stood once more and walked back into the bathroom. I watched as she went inside and shut the door.

“Yep, Mr. Olin,” I whispered to myself. “A real Class-A *fucking* idiot.”

Chapter 34

We checked out of the hotel a little after ten and I drove over to Club-Dexter in Ensley. Ollie said he'd be there along with Reese and several of his security people. Sheila was following behind in her car to make sure we weren't ambushed, and we weren't.

Once we got to the club Reese went right to Nina and the two women embraced fiercely. Ollie and two guards were standing near the hosting station and he was giving them instructions. When he was done they went in opposite directions and then Ollie walked across to me, staring over at Nina and Reese. Sheila had come in a few seconds behind us and now stood on my left. Ollie nodded at her and she nodded back.

"So you two got four last night," Ollie said. "Impressive. I hear Dedrick Cutts was one of them. 'Nother one name Tommy Venard. Both scum. Got what they deserved. Any problems with the cops?"

"No," I said. "They seem happy that these four got dropped. Cutts is still alive by the way, but his right hand is gone. He's in the hospital under heavy sedation. They don't expect to get much out of him or the other guy when he wakes up. If he wakes up. I shot him in the legs and some of the pellets seem to have found their way to some arteries."

"Neal Tatum," Ollie said. "He a piece of shit too. Don't matter if he die. We all know it was Innes sent them. But I bet the cops can't do nothin' about it."

"That's right," I said.

Ollie shook his head dismissively, glancing over at Reese and Nina once more.

Reese said she was going to take Nina into her office and I nodded, watching as the two women walked down the front corridor to where the hosting manager's office was located. Ollie told Sheila to hang around up front and keep an eye on things, then he motioned for me to follow him down the back corridor to his office.

Extraction

He took a seat behind his desk and raised his long legs, resting the heels of his designer leather cowboy boots on the back edge, folding his hands across his flat stomach.

"Something tell me she ain't ready to leave still," Ollie said as I settled in the chair across from his desk.

"That something would be correct, sir," I told him. "Says she can't leave her mother."

"Course she do. But I bet you think it more than that?"

"Yeah. No clue what that more might be, but I think she's holding something back. There has got to be more of a reason behind why she's still hanging around Birmingham even after four guys came to her place and tried to kill her. Or at least to kill me and abduct her."

"You think they was gonna kill you and take her back to Innes?"

I nodded slowly, glancing out the window on the right side of the office, seeing the gray day continuing to unfold.

"Maybe," I said. "I think Innes would rather have her alive if he could, make her an example. He'll kill her if he has to, I have no doubt of that, but I think he wants her back in the stable. That's a little odd too, don't you think?"

Ollie nodded.,

"Yeah. She just a ho'. A good lookin' one no doubt. Probably bring him in a lot of bread, but she can be replaced. Plenty of other girls out there. So why she so important?"

"Good question," I said. "One I would maybe like to have answered. But right now I have to find a way to keep her safe, find some place where Innes won't locate her too quickly."

"I could maybe arrange something," Ollie offered. "Seeing as how I did get you into this one."

"I remember that," I said wryly. "But I think I already have something else in mind. I need to go and check with somebody first. You think Nina could stay here for a while? Maybe two or three hours?"

"Sure," Ollie said. "This place is more secure than most bank vaults. Got three guys on, two outside. Plus Sheila in here, and me. And I really don't think Innes dumb enough to try to send somebody in here."

“I hope not,” I said. “But you never know what Nestor would be likely to do.”

Ollie nodded, shifting around a little in his chair.

“That another story. Deal with it if it happen.”

I nodded.

“All you can do.”

Chapter 35

Every Monday when I can, usually when I'm not working, I spend a few hours at the F.O.P. Range, Inc. in Pleasant Grove. I've been a member of the range for several years and have come to know many members of the senior staff quite well, even calling some of them friend. Probably the one I am closest to is a former Marine Force Recon NCO by the name of Pete Newhouse. Pete is the senior range officer and usually works the morning shift during the week. When I got there at eleven-thirty he was in the clubhouse with another range officer that I didn't know as well but had seen around a few times.

Pete smiled when I came in, waving a thick hand at me. I went over and shook his hand, then the other range officer's, his name was Todd. After a few minutes Todd said he was going to go out and check the ranges, make sure nobody was committing any safety violations. There was no one else in the clubhouse at the moment so Pete stepped from behind the counter and went over to the coffee machine in the corner near the front door and got himself a cup.

"So what brings you out here on a Thursday, Derrick," he said after adding cream and sugar and bringing it over to one of the round tables on the left side of the room just in front of the side windows. "Monday is usually your day."

"Yeah," I said, joining him at the table. "And after last night I won't need any range practice for a while."

Pete stopped stirring his coffee and looked up at me curiously, the scar just under his left eye very defined in the overhead light.

"What happened last night?" he asked.

I told him.

He smiled and had a quick sip of his coffee.

"Heard something about that on the news this morning. Didn't know it was you though. You look okay. Bet the other guys don't."

I nodded, glancing out the window for a moment.

“So you’re on another job, huh?” Pete said. “Derrick, you do lead an exciting life. I remember a year or so back, maybe longer, when you had me backing you up on that gang thing.⁸ That was kind of fun. But if my wife ever found out about it I’d be a dead man; if I was lucky. So I hope you aren’t here because you want me to get in on this. If I was single I wouldn’t mind, but...”

“I wasn’t thinking of asking you to, Pete,” I said, holding up a hand. “Really. I know your situation. But you are a hell of a guy to have as backup when the chips are down.”

Pete smiled.

“Don’t try flattery, Derrick. It might work.”

I chuckled.

“Nah, not trying to do that. But I was wondering if you might be able to give me some other kind of help.”

“If I can,” he said, taking a larger sip of his coffee. “What you need?”

“That house over on Cypress Lane,” I said. “Does the range still maintain it?”

“Sure,” Pete said. “Jon took it over completely last year and it’s just sitting there. I checked on it last week. All the utilities are hooked up, got furniture. Hell, I think that sometimes Jon lets his married cop buddies take their girlfriends in there. Why do you ask?”

“Because I need a safe place to put my client for a few days,” I told him.

Pete stared at me over the rim of his cup for a few moments, then smiled.

“And I take it you don’t want anybody else to know about it, not even Jon?”

“If you can swing it,” I said. “If not, I’ll try something else.”

Pete shook his head as he set his cup down on the table.

“Shouldn’t be any sweat,” he said. “I got the keys and Jon pretty much lets me look after the place. I can probably do it for four days, maybe a week without any questions. Maybe longer if you need it.”

“I appreciate it, Pete,” I told him.

“No sweat. You need it today?”

⁸ See *Vicious* by Stellen Qxz

Extraction

“If possible.”

He nodded again.

“I think I can do it. Like I said, it’s got everything in there and the utilities. Three bedrooms, kitchen, two baths, living room and dining room. No food though.”

“I’ll take care of that,” I told him.

“Alright then,” Pete said, finishing his coffee and pushing up from the table. “I’ll tell Todd to look after the place for a little while and you and I’ll take a ride over in my pickup. Okay?”

I nodded and stood up.

“Okay.”

Chapter 36

I got back to Club-Dexter around two-thirty and Earl was there along with everybody else I had left. He had made lunch for everyone once again and asked if I'd like a plate because there was plenty of his *world-famous* spaghetti left. I hadn't eaten yet so I said sure and joined the rest of them at the same back table we had used last time.

Ollie, Reese, and Nina were drinking coffee and Earl had a Pepsi. A couple of tables away in the corner Sheila sat watching the front of the club, a soda of some sort on the table near her left hand. A server brought a plate and silverware from the kitchen for me and my mouth started to water before I took my first bite.

It was delicious.

"So I understand you had some excitement last night, Derrick," Earl said, sipping his Pepsi. "You seem to make the news more than the president sometimes, man."

I chewed a spicy meatball and washed it down with water.

"Just lucky I guess," I told him, glancing over at Nina where she sat next to Reese. "This is good by the way."

Earl smiled.

"Of course it is," he said. "I'm a good cook."

"*Now* he is," Ollie said with a small grin. "But there was a time..."

"In the past," Earl said quickly. "In the past. So now what you goin' do, Derrick? 'Bout the young lady and all? You know Innes ain't goin' back down."

I concentrated on my food for a few minutes, my stomach telling me that I was much hungrier than I had realized. I had more water and set the glass back down, then glanced sideways at Earl.

"Well while I was out I managed to find a place to put my client up for a few days."

Nina looked over at me, her expression expectant.

Extraction

"Well good," Earl said. "Some place secluded I take it?"

"Yeah," I said. "Out of Redbone's normal operating patch. But sooner or later he might get word."

"Where, Derrick?" Reese said. "Where is this place?"

"Best not to say right now, Reese," I told her gently. "The fewer people who know the better. And besides, I'd kind of like to keep you out of the line of fire on this. If Innes Redbone thought you could tell him where Nina was he wouldn't hesitate to send someone to get you. Or if he thought hurting you would work to his advantage he'd do that as well."

"Well actually, Derrick," Nina said in a hesitant voice, clearing her throat. "Reese and I were talking and she said that maybe I could stay with her for a few days. That would be convenient because she lives closer to Fairview and I could see my mom more regularly."

"Bad idea," Ollie said. "Convenient for you and convenient for them as well. They know where your momma at. They wait there till you show up. And if you staying with Reese then like Derrick say, she in their line of fire."

"Exactly," I told her. "We want to keep you safe, not put a friend of yours at risk. No, you should definitely not stay with Reese. Or anyone else you know. And Ollie's right. No more visits to the nursing home for a while. I've got people there watching the place round-the-clock and you can call and get reports from the doctors as often as you like, but going there only increases the danger to you. For right now we need to do what we can to minimize that. If you're going to stay in town we need to make it as difficult as possible for them to find you. Do you understand?"

Nina lowered her head and was silent. I waited and so did everyone else. Reese put her hand on her friend's shoulder and looked over at me, her expression not pleasant.

Finally Nina nodded her head but did not look up.

I went back to eating my lunch.

When I was done Earl had everything cleared away and we sat for a while longer, making small talk. Sheila excused herself to use the bathroom and Reese asked if it would be alright if she went over to Nina's condo to get some of her things since it was obvious that I wouldn't be letting her friend go back there herself.

This was not a good idea because someone might be there watching the place and Reese might get hurt. But Ollie said he'd go with her and they could bring the stuff back to the club and it could be picked up later. I said okay to that.

When Sheila came back I asked her to go out and check the perimeter because we would be leaving soon. She did so without comment.

"Are you gonna take her there right now?" Ollie asked as we all stood around the table.

"Yeah," I told him. "Already went out and got groceries and some other stuff. Once I get her settled in I need to talk to you."

Ollie nodded.

"I'll be around here till about five, then I gotta go home and take care of something. Be back by nine. That okay?"

"Sure," I told him. "It'll be fine."

He nodded.

I looked across the table at Nina. She and Reese had their heads together whispering. Nina was obviously agitated and I could understand why, considering all that was going on in her life. But I still got this nagging feeling about her.

It bothered me greatly.

I didn't like things that bothered me greatly.

Chapter 37

190 Cypress Lane was a modern home built in the last ten to fifteen years, and equipped with every modern convenience. I didn't know exactly how it came to be a possession of the F.O.P. Range, and at the moment I didn't really care, I was just glad that it was available.

I took a very circuitous route from the club to the house, using up an hour and a half, making absolutely sure that we were not followed. Sheila trailed behind in her own vehicle and assured me by cell phone that no one was on our tail before I headed back toward Pleasant Grove where the house was located.

The garage in back of the property was big enough for two cars and that's where Sheila and I had parked, then went into the house with Nina. She still carried the small suitcase she had packed last night before we left her condo and looked cautiously around at the living room as we entered. It was spacious and nicely furnished and I could tell by her expression that this was not what she had expected.

"I wasn't going to put you up in a hole, Nina," I said gently as Sheila closed the interior door that led to the garage. "It's a nice house."

"Yeah," she said, walking around and looking at everything. "I can see. Who's is it? Yours?"

"No," I told her, dropping my duffel on the lavish sofa near the front door. "A friend's. There are three bedrooms here. Two upstairs and one down. I looked at them earlier and suggest you take the one that overlooks the backyard. But the same rules apply here as at your place. Keep the blinds closed and the curtains pulled at all times. Actually that goes in every room. I've already done that so please let them stay that way."

Nina turned and looked at me, nodded.

"Sure. Can I go up now?"

I nodded and said I'd take her. I told Sheila to have a look around and I'd be back in a few minutes.

When I returned I found her sitting in a large leather chair directly across from the front door.

“Be careful there or that thing will swallow you up,” I said.

Sheila smiled a little.

“House don’t have an alarm,” she said. “But all the locks are good.”

“Yeah,” I said, moving over to sit on the sofa. “I noticed that. I think I might go get some of those portable noisemaker alarms and put them on the doors and some of the windows. At least that way we’ll have an early-warning system.”

Sheila nodded.

“Sound good.”

“I want to tell you, Sheila, we can have the same arrangement we had over at Nina’s place with you working twelves from eight to eight, or if you want you can bunk here. Got the spare room and all. Your choice.”

She raised her head and glanced at the ceiling for a few moments, considering my offer very carefully, then nodded slowly.

“Might be a good idea for me to stay here a while. Two of us here be better than one. But I need to go and get some extra stuff.”

“Sure,” I said. “No problem. In fact, if you want to go now you can. Later I need to go to the club and see Ollie but that won’t be till after he gets back around nine.”

Sheila nodded and pushed up from the chair.

“Okay then,” she said. “I’ll go right now.”

I stood too.

“Alright, but be careful. Chances are that by now they know you’re in on this thing with me. They might try coming after you.”

Sheila looked up at me and actually smiled fully for the first time since I had known her.

“Now wouldn’t that be fun?” she said.

I smiled too, feeling just the hint of a slight tremor move up my spine.

Yep, a really dangerous little woman.

Glad she was on my side in all of this.

Chapter 38

Friday night they made a try for Nina's mom at Fairview. Ed Monroe was on duty at a quarter after nine when two cars pulled into the lot and rolled up to the front parking area outside the main entrance. He later reported that as soon as he saw the cars his stomach sank, and he reached for the shotgun on the floor between the seats...

I got the call at ten-thirty and it took me about a half hour to get from Pleasant Grove over to Midfield, leaving Sheila to cover a sleeping Nina Neetor after I gave her a quick briefing.

When I arrived every patrol car Midfield had on nightshift was there, along with several from Jefferson County, three from Fairfield, one from Bessemer, and about a dozen from Birmingham. That's the way things worked in smaller jurisdictions when major incidents occurred. Other departments responded to lend a hand, especially the bigger ones like Birmingham and Jefferson County.

I soon learned that there was another reason for such a large Birmingham presence. As it happened, Sergeant William Arthur of BPD's West Precinct lived in Midfield and was on his way home after a late evening supervisors' meeting down at police headquarters. He was driving past Fairview on the Bessemer Superhighway when he heard shots, and then his training kicked in and he went to investigate.

In the ensuing gunfight Sergeant Arthur managed to drop three of the attackers with his sidearm—a Smith & Wesson .38 special that he had carried on duty for almost twenty years now—and came very close to shooting Ed Monroe before he identified himself. Joining forces at that point, the two men engaged the rest of the hostiles and drove them from the property before they could enter the building, wounding at least two more before three others fled in one of their vehicles.

When I arrived the police had the entrance to Fairview blocked down on the highway and I had to get cleared through a supervisor. This took about

ten minutes and then I was allowed to enter, driving up past a line of uniformed officers and deputies from various departments and directed to park on the east side of the lot where Ed Monroe's GEO was still parked.

All the exterior lights were on in the parking lot as well as the headlights and flashers of all the police vehicles and ambulances present. The scene looked like the aftermath of an epic battle, and I suppose that is precisely what it was.

A paramedic was treating Ed Monroe for a cut on his left cheek when I walked up. They were at the back of one of the ambulances parked off to the side of the main parking lot in front of the building, behind several police cars.

"How is he?" I asked the medic.

"I'm fine, Derrick," Ed said and grimaced. "Just got cut by some glass or something. Nothing too serious."

I looked at the medic and she nodded.

"You okay otherwise?" I said.

"Yeah," he said. "This time I didn't let the bastards take me. And Sergeant Arthur showing up when he did was a real good thing."

"Oh you had 'em on the run by the time I showed up," a booming bass voice said from behind me. I turned and saw the barrel-chested police sergeant grinning, his bushy graying mustache completely covering his upper lip. "Kid was like Rambo, Derrick."

I smiled.

"Hey, Arty," I said. "Aren't you in the wrong jurisdiction?"

Arty shook his head, reaching up to adjust his gold framed glasses.

"I'm a cop wherever I am," he said. "Plus this is just a few blocks from my house. First I wasn't sure what the hell I was hearing, then I knew. And like a fool I just rolled up here into the middle of fucking *Dodge City*."

"Well I'm glad you did," I told him. "Real glad. What was the total count?"

"We got five down here," Sergeant Arthur reported. "All dead. I saw maybe three or four get away. Could have been more. Things kind of jumped off fast."

"I'll bet. Anybody hurt inside?"

Extraction

“Nah,” Arty said, glancing over toward the building. “They never made it inside. Doors secured at night and ‘fore they could even get out of their cars your boy there was on ‘em with his shotgun. They was punks—bangers. Vicious but no real know-how or skills. Ed tells me he used to be in the Security Forces in the Air Force. Now he work for Master-Plan downtown. Say he doing this extra job for you?”

“Yeah,” I told him, briefly glancing over at Ed Monroe and the medic, then taking the sergeant by the arm and moving several feet away. “It’s a peripheral thing on a job I’m doing. My client’s mother is a patient here and I think that the folks after my client sent these guys over to make a point.”

“Well they made it alright,” Arty said. “If they was tryin’ to prove they was incompetent. Who your client? Or are you gonna to say?”

I thought for a minute, weighing everything carefully.

“She’s a call-girl who works for Innes Redbone’s lady, Sweet Mya Brown. She wants out. They don’t want to let her go.”

Arty frowned and adjusted his glasses again.

“That shooting off of 280 the other night,” he said. “That was you too, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Yep. They tried for my client that time. And failed.”

“Now they O for two,” he said. “Think they’d learn. But this Innes Redbone we talkin’ about. Boy ain’t exactly known for logical thinking.”

“True,” I said. “This is why I put my client in a secluded location after that incident. So they came after her mother. She requires special medical care and can’t be easily moved.”

“Innes Redbone a punk,” Arty said. “A real vicious punk. Coming after an old lady in a nursing home all over a hooker. Well what you gonna do now?”

“That’s a good question, Sergeant,” I said coolly. “The answer to which I have been devoting a significant amount of careful thought.”

Arty looked at me for a long moment and then a smile cracked in his dark face.

“I’ll just bet you have,” he said, then put a meaty hand on my shoulder. “And keep it to yourself. As a police officer I suspect it’s something I don’t want to know ‘bout.”

I didn’t respond and he moved his hand.

This, too, was a long night, stretching on into morning.

I was not looking forward to telling Nina about this incident, but the good news was that her mom was safe. Of course, I wasn’t sure how much longer she’d be able to stay at Fairview. Besides her safety, the home had about a hundred other patients to look after. No doubt tonight’s events had been very traumatic for them. Pretty soon Nina might have no choice but to move her mother anyway because the administrators would not want to risk losing other clients.

Right now, however, that was not the paramount consideration on my mind.

I was thinking about antiterrorism tactics—and physics.

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

It was now time for a little *reactionary* action.

Chapter 39

All along 35th Avenue North close to the North Birmingham neighborhood of Collegeville there are a number of dilapidated buildings that were once the home of many industrial businesses in the area, now long gone. There are also a number of abandoned and falling down houses along this same stretch of road. They should all be condemned and torn down, but with the current fiscal situation in the city and the county it was unlikely that any action would be taken regarding this or any of the other rundown neighborhoods any time soon.

And for the criminal element of the city this was a good thing, it gave them plenty of dark places to do their business unseen. I had recently learned that Innes Redbone used several properties along 35th as temporary storage for some of his illicit products before they were to be shipped to his suppliers. The locales were always heavily guarded by Nestor Cabaña's hard guys and each of them knew that if they let something happen to any of the merchandise they were protecting it would be better that they kill themselves before Nestor Cabaña got his hands on them.

Saturday night I set fire to a falling down house on 34th Court North just south of 35th and made sure the enforcers on guard duty couldn't do anything to put it out or remove the product, everything was a total loss.

Sunday night I torched two more of Redbone's storage buildings in the neighborhood, one I knew for sure was a cache of automatic weapons due to be shipped out of town to a biker gang in New Orleans. Innes would not be happy about losing that business, and neither would his clients.

Too bad for both of them.

As for me it was the best laugh I had all month.

I estimated that my activities over the weekend had cost Mr. Redbone's organization maybe one and a quarter million dollars, half of it profit. Not a colossal loss for Birmingham's *Godfather of Crime*, but it would annoy him, and make him lose face in front of some of his rivals. My hope was that

this would show him that he had a lot more to lose than anybody else in this whole thing and that he should cut his losses now and back off.

However, I knew that this was not likely to be the case. As had recently been discussed, Innes Redbone was not exactly known for clear and rational thinking, especially when he was being challenged. He was being made to look bad in front of his people, in front of his competition, and most importantly, in front of his woman. No, he wouldn't back off just yet, and for that reason, neither would I.

The next move was up to him, but that didn't mean I couldn't plan a few others of my own.

I got a call Monday afternoon from Rhonie McDavid. I was in the kitchen at the Cypress Lane house making a cup of herbal tea when my cell rang. At first I didn't recognize the number, then remembered reading it off the back of her business card the day she handed it to me in her office after our interview. It was her private cell.

I set my cup down on the counter and answered the call.

"Well I'm glad to know you're still alive," Rhonie said. "I've been hearing that recently you've been at the heart of many scenes of violence around the city."

I chuckled.

"People exaggerate," I told her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she replied. "But then I'm not the one getting shot at all the time. My police sources tell me you were the one involved in that shooting over on 280 last week. Several people shot, two dead, two still in the hospital. You weren't hurt, were you?"

"No," I told her. "I'm fine."

"Well good," she said. "But then I hear that that thing in Midfield on Friday night involved you too. Although not directly. I heard you were on the scene right after it was all over. Care to comment?"

I chuckled again.

"You calling as a reporter?" I said.

She paused.

"How about we just say this is a call from a friend concerned about another friend," she told me.

Extraction

"Fair enough," I said. "Can't really tell you too much, Rhonie. I'm working, protecting a client. Some people tried to hurt her and I stopped them."

"Was she in the nursing home that was attacked?" she asked.

"No," I said. "But someone close to her is. It's complicated and I can't really get into it right now. But thanks for the concern. Really, I'm fine."

She paused again.

"Very glad to hear it. Remember, I've still got some questions to ask you before I finish my story. You get yourself killed and I might never be able to finish my report."

We both laughed.

"I'll try to keep that in mind, Rhonie," I said. "And I haven't forgotten our lunch date."

"Me either," she said. "I suppose you're too busy right now playing *Wyatt Earp* to make good on it?"

I thought a minute, staring out the kitchen window, then I shook my head.

"Actually no I'm not. When are you not busy this week?"

"I'm free now," she said. "Only a little past noon. Want to meet some place?"

Again I gave her question some thought.

"Probably couldn't be until one or one-fifteen," I said.

"No problem," she said. "Got a place in mind?"

"Ever hear of a place called *Mama Edna's* in Center Point?" I said.

"No," she said. "But I'm sure I can find it."

"Not hard," I told her. "Just get off at the Center Point exit and head north for about two miles. It's off to the right in the Roebuck Shopping Plaza where the old Wal-Mart used to be and that big thrift store is now."

"I think I know where that is," she said. "Say one or one-fifteen then?"

I nodded.

"Sure," I said.

Rhonie said good bye and hung up.

I pressed the END key and put my phone back on my belt, grinning like a moron despite myself. I picked up my tea and took a sip, then dumped the rest of it into the sink.

Going out to lunch with a beautiful married reporter in the middle of a protection assignment was not the most professional thing to do. However I reasoned that the danger was minimal. Our location was still secure for the moment. Besides, Sheila was here and I had every confidence in her ability to take care of things until I came back.

And I really did want to go have lunch with Rhonie McDavid.

So I went.

Chapter 40

Mama Edna's diner is a small single-owner restaurant operated by a sweet sixty-eight year old black woman that everybody calls *Mama*. I've been a regular customer for years and have never had a bad meal. Mama is usually on duty at least part of every day the restaurant is open and can usually be found out front greeting everyone as they come in, warm and friendly. However, today Mama had a doctor's appointment and her assistant manager was running things.

The assistant manager is Cathy Carmichael, and while she was not as outgoing and gregarious as Mama Edna, she did her best to make everyone feel welcome. Cathy was in her mid-thirties, divorced, and the mother of two young kids. Although I didn't know a lot about her life before she came to the restaurant a couple years ago, I could tell there was a lot of unpleasantness in her past. It was in her eyes, the distant stares when she didn't think anyone was looking, the way she sometimes jumped at the most normal of sounds. Someone had hurt her, very badly I would guess. But now she seemed to be trying to put her life back on track and Mama Edna had given her an opportunity she did not intend to mess up.

Rhonie and I linked up in the parking lot out in front of the diner and Cathy met us as we came in, smiling as warmly as she could manage, and then personally escorted us to a booth along the left back wall. She gave us menus and said a waiter or waitress would be along soon with water and would take our orders. We thanked her and she turned to leave.

Ordinarily I would have glanced after her because Cathy has a rather nice round butt, however, due to the company I was in today, I refrained.

Rhonie was wearing yellow pants and a long sleeve purple button-down blouse. She had been wearing a lightweight yellow jacket but took it off before we sat down and now I could see her wonderful chest in all its splendid glory. Well as much of it as could be seen with her blouse in the way.

She opened her menu and then looked up at me.

“Well you appear to be in one piece,” she quipped, smiling. “Seeing it with my own eyes makes me feel better.”

I opened my menu and smiled at her.

“Been doing this work for a long time, Rhonie,” I told her. “Not the first violent incident I’ve gone through. Probably not the last.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?” she said, leaning her chest against the table. “The violence, the killing, almost getting killed yourself?”

I avoided gazing at her breasts pressing against her side of the table, instead focusing directly on her intense blue eyes.

“Depends on what you mean by *bother*,” I told her. “People who try to kill a client of mine—and me in the process—don’t get a lot of sympathy from me. None actually. The way I see it, it’s either them or me. They didn’t have to come to the party, but they did, and they paid the price of admission. Simple as that.”

Rhonie sat and stared at me quietly for a while, and then our waiter came with water. He asked if we were ready to order and we paused our discussion a bit longer to read through the menus and make selections. I chose a chef’s salad and Rhonie ordered a grilled chicken Caesar salad.

“You’ve killed before?” Rhonie said after the waiter left, her voice low and surprisingly devoid of any hint of condemnation. Just asking questions and eliciting answers.

I stared into her eyes for a moment longer.

“Yes,” I told her. “I have.”

She didn’t say anything, just kept looking into my eyes.

“And it really doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“No,” I said. “First time was a long time ago when I was still in the Air Force. Everybody always tells you how it will feel if you have to kill someone, all the emotions you go through, the regrets, the anger, how awesome it all is. It was never any of that for me. It was just a thing, an occurrence in my life. Don’t get me wrong, killing people is not something I enjoy or even look forward to doing. It is a hard, dirty, and brutal thing. But when it comes right down to it, killing somebody really isn’t that hard for me; and I suspect that is the case for a lot of people. Otherwise there probably wouldn’t be as much killing in the world as there is today.”

I stopped talking and Rhonie kept staring.

Extraction

I waited.

Eventually she looked away and sat back in her chair.

“You really are something, Derrick Olin,” she said after more time had gone by, and now there was a small twist at the right corner of her full lips and a smile widening on her face. “I knew that the first moment I met you. And I know I said it before, but I’ll say it again. I really am glad you’re okay.”

I smiled and reached for my glass of water.

“So am I,” I told her. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to come here today and have lunch with you.”

Rhonie smiled again and then picked up her water, staring at me over the rim as she raised the glass to her lips.

During lunch we talked about our personal lives. Mostly Rhonie talked and I listened. She told me about her early life growing up in New England, her parents, siblings, the various schools she attended, how she met her husband, and her kids. I asked how she ended up working in Birmingham, Alabama and she laughed, covering her mouth with her left hand, and for the first time today I actually caught sight of the large diamond engagement ring and wedding band on her finger. Quite impressive. Then she told me the story of how Birmingham had become her home.

After that she asked about my life and I told her some things, mostly about growing up in Ensley, high school, college, then the Air Force. There wasn’t a whole lot of personal commentary and she asked about that. I shook my head and smiled casually, telling her that with me there just wasn’t that much that was personal.

Rhonie stared deeply into my eyes for a long time following that statement, her face as close to blank as I have ever seen it. Suddenly she reached across the table and took my hand.

“I really do find that very hard to believe, Derrick,” she said in a soft voice, her eyes never leaving mine. “Nearly impossible.”

I stared back at her unblinkingly, feeling a familiar stirring within me, and a longing desire. And it was no surprise to me that I saw the same things stirring in Rhonie’s lovely eyes as well.

“Why don’t I get the check?” I told her.

“Why don’t you do that?” she said.

So I did, and we went up to the front counter and I paid, leaving a tip for our waiter with Cathy at the register.

Rhonie and I went back out to the parking lot and over to where we had parked a few spaces from one another. Rhonie had a last year's model Buick Rendezvous SUV. She unlocked the driver's door and turned to face me, leaning back against the vehicle.

"I'm not doing anything else till I have to do a report for the six o'clock news," she told me. "How about you?"

"I've got a client I'm supposed to be looking after," I said. "But right now she's in good hands."

Rhonie nodded.

"Would you like to get in and go somewhere with me?" she said.

I nodded without hesitation or thought.

"Yes I would," I said.

So that's exactly what we did.

Chapter 41

The closest hotel to Mama Edna's is actually right across Roebuck Parkway, the *Intown Suites*. However it is a little on the low-rent side and if I remembered correctly it only offered rooms on a weekly basis.

Four miles to the east over in Trussville there are several newer and better hotels, more expensive, but also cleaner and more private. Of these, the Marriott is probably the best, and it is to it that Rhonie and I drove after leaving the diner's parking lot.

I went in and secured a room on the fifth floor in back, mindful of the fact that my companion was a public figure and might be recognized. I called Rhonie on her cell phone and told her which room and she drove around back and came in the hotel that way, taking the back stairs.

I was already in the room and waiting when she entered a few minutes later, having removed my jacket and opened the door for her. There was something in her eyes, something primal, something instinctive, something that made my insides heat up.

I closed and locked the door and turned to find Rhonie a mere few inches from me, her perfume filling my nostrils, her presence very thick in the air. She was smiling.

"There isn't much time," she said in a low voice.

I nodded.

"But it'll be enough."

She grinned again and put her hands on my chest. I leaned down and kissed her, slipping my arms around her back, pulling her body against mine.

There was no rushing, no quickness to what we did. Each of us wanted to enjoy this to the fullest, and despite the short time we had, we intended to take full advantage.

I undressed her first, standing at the foot of the king-sized bed, removing her jacket, then her blouse. She kicked her shoes off and sat down on

the bed and I knelt in front of her, reaching up and undoing her belt. Rhonie lay back and watched as I pulled down and removed her pants, then hooked my thumbs into the top corners of her pantyhose, pulling them down as she lifted her legs once more to ease my efforts. All the while her cobalt blue eyes stayed on me, seeming more green than blue in the subdued lighting of the hotel room. And there was an expression of mirthful wickedness on her face that was making me crazy inside.

After I removed her hose I stood and leaned over her body to kiss her. She put a hand on my shoulder and stroked it, commenting on my *impressive* muscle development. I smiled and stood up once more, looking at her lying on the bed. Then I sat down beside her, placing my right hand on her stomach, stroking her softly with the pads of my fingers.

Rhonie said that it tickled but didn't ask me to stop, so I didn't. I leaned down and kissed her again, first her full wet lips, then her neck, and finally her chest, the flesh here a little red.

I ran my tongue all across the skin of her chest and moved down further to the point between her breasts which were still encased in a sturdy white lace bra. Rhonie giggled as my tongue tickled her.

"That feels nice," she breathed.

"It does," I said in a low tone. "You feel nice."

Rhonie looked into my eyes as I looked at her body, reaching for my hand and bringing it up to her right breast. That felt very nice too and I felt a sharp and very familiar stiffness in my pants. We kissed again, crushing our mouths against one another's as our passion continued to grow. Then Rhonie sat up and I hurriedly removed her bra.

Oh my, what a beautiful sight.

My pants were getting really tight now.

I never had any doubts as to whether or not *they* were real. If I had had such doubts they were all gone now. And despite the fact that she was in her mid-fifties her breasts were still remarkably firm. I'm not one of those guys who necessarily likes large breasts, although I don't have anything against them. Really for me the size doesn't matter, but I do have to admit, Rhonie's really intrigued me.

With her now undressed, we pulled the covers back on the bed and she lay down in the center with her head propped up on two fluffy pillows. I

Extraction

quickly undressed myself as Rhonie watched and smiled, the tip of her tongue slowly moistening her lips with anticipation.

Now naked myself, I returned to the bed and knelt at her side, staring down at her lush and wanton body. I was fully tumescent, full of desire and lust, and all other thoughts were gone from my mind at the moment. Rhonie reached out and took my erection in her left hand, stroking carefully, then she tugged suddenly and I groaned. She was grinning and I grinned too. I dropped down beside her and kissed her lips.

Very quickly the passions inside both of us took over and things became a lot more intense.

An hour later Rhonie had come five times. I was just about to complete my second trip down that road. She was sitting astride me, head thrown back, hands pressing into my chest, legs locked against mine, hips rotating slowly, and her pelvis grinding hard against mine. Her eyes were closed but mine were open and I watched her, listened as she moaned deeply, feeling her wetness as my organ moved within her.

I reached up and took her breasts in my palms, squeezing, pushing them together, stoking the nipples with my fingers, wanting to taste them once more but couldn't quite call up the strength needed in order to raise my upper body.

Suddenly Rhonie started moving faster and I felt the wave as it overcame me in a torrent of explosions and spent lust. She looked down and opened her eyes, staring right into mine with an intensity that would have made lesser men nervous; but not this man. I loved every second of it.

Rhonie collapsed on top of me breathing heavily and covered in sweat. I put my arms around her back and we lay like that for a long time until our heartbeats returned to normal, or as close to it as possible.

Rhonie raised her head and was giggling.

I chuckled and kissed her on the nose, tousling her once perfect hair, now very unruly.

"So you satisfied now that I am a *real* blonde?" she said and gently bit me on the chest.

"Oh, I was satisfied in that regard the second I took your underwear off," I told her. "Or maybe it was shortly after I slid my tongue across your clitoris."

Rhonie laughed and nibbled on my neck.

“God you almost made me come right then,” she said. “I’ve never known a guy who really knew what he was doing when it came to oral sex. God, Derrick, you ought to teach a course.”

I chuckled again and squeezed her to me.

“Funny you should say that. You know how I actually learned those techniques?”

“How, watching a porno?”

“Close,” I told her. “*How To* sex videos. Saw an add for them some place about twenty years ago, bought a couple. I’m not ashamed, they taught me a lot.”

Rhonie moaned happily and kissed me on the lips.

“They did,” she said. “A whole lot. Is that where you picked up some of those *other* things?”

“Some,” I admitted. “Others I’ve learned with other women over the years. Figured if it pleases one woman it might do the same for others.”

“Well you were right, at least as far as this woman is concerned. God this is exactly what I needed. It’s been so long since...”

She paused and I watched her. After a few moments more she shook her head and looked back into my eyes.

“It’s not important now. I don’t want to talk about it. You know I’m married, I have kids and all, and I do love my husband. We’ve been married for thirty years and for the most part things are good. It’s just in some areas...”

I put a finger to her lips.

“Shhhh. Not necessary for you to explain. This is what it is. Something we both wanted and both seem to be enjoying. We don’t have to talk about it.”

Rhonie stared at me some more, her eyes more serious than I had seen them in the last hour. She nodded slowly and kissed me again, glancing over at the bedside clock.

“Still got a little more time,” she said. “Think maybe once more around the block?”

I smiled, slipping my hands down her back and cupping her *squeezably* soft buttocks.

Extraction

“At least once more, love,” I told her. “I’ve got a whole list of other techniques and little tricks left in my bag. I was kind of hopping to explore at least a few more with you this afternoon.”

Rhonie grinned and leaned down to kiss me again.

“Oh good,” she said, her mouth still against mine. “Then why don’t you open your bag and show me something good.”

I kissed her, and then rolled her onto her back, coming up on my knees above her.

“Your wish, my dear...” I said impishly.

Then I dropped down onto my stomach and sank my head between her silky smooth thighs...

Chapter 42

I got back to the Cypress Lane safehouse at six-thirty and found Nina and Sheila in the kitchen making dinner. Actually Nina was making dinner and Sheila was keeping her company, leaning against the wall across from the backdoor, her arms folded across her small body, the MAC-11 dangling from the rig under her left arm.

Nina turned and smiled when I came into the kitchen. She was wearing formfitting blue jeans and a blue cardigan over a white blouse. The picture was quite a sight. I could see why she was so valuable to Sweet Mya Brown's operation.

Sheila excused herself when I came in, saying she was going to go watch some TV, there was a movie coming on cable in a little while that she wanted to see.

"She doesn't talk much, does she?" Nina said when we were alone.

"No," I confirmed. "One of the reasons she and I get along so well."

Nina smiled again and turned back to the counter.

"I hope you like fried chicken," she said. "I'm making it along with cornbread and rice."

"That'll be fine," I told her, moving over to the table in the middle of the room and pulling out a chair, sitting down. "How are you doing, Nina?"

She didn't turn around and I could see that her shoulders were a little pinched.

"I'm okay," she said after a pause. "I called Fairview today and checked on my mom. She's doing about the same. The administrator told me that the board had met this morning and the subject of what happened last week came up. No decision has been made yet, but they are considering asking me to remove my mother."

I nodded to myself.

"We knew that was a possibility, Nina," I said carefully.

Extraction

She nodded sharply, still concentrating on what she was doing at the counter.

"I know. I was just hoping... I don't know what I was hoping." She turned suddenly, her hands covered in flour. Her eyes were unsure and didn't quite focus on me when she spoke. "Derrick, I..."

I waited.

"Derrick, right now I..."

Another pause. She turned back toward the counter.

I stood up and walked over, turning my back to the counter and leaning my butt against it a couple of feet to her left.

"What is it, Nina?" I said gently. "We both know you aren't telling me something. Why is it that you aren't ready to leave Birmingham yet? There has to be a reason. You knew how Innes Redbone would react when you tried to leave. The safest and smartest thing to do was to get out of town, and to try to get your mother out right away as well, despite the medical risks. But you didn't do that, instead you hired me, and you stayed put. Even after there have been two attempts, one on you and the other on your mother, you are still here. Why? What is it that you aren't telling me?"

I stopped talking and stood staring at the side of her face for maybe two minutes. Nina stood still and did not turn to look at me during that time. Finally I reached out and touched her shoulder and she flinched, pulling away.

More time went by before she finally turned her head, tears falling from her eyes.

"Derrick, I just can't say. Not right now. Please, don't make me."

At that moment I wondered if she had been a man—or *ugly*—would I have been letting her get away with jerking me around like this. Was it because she was a beautiful woman—a *damsel in distress*—that I was going easy on her and putting myself in greater jeopardy? Was Paige right that I actually sought to put myself in increasingly dangerous situations?

Did I really care what the answers were?

Not tonight.

I nodded, put my hand on her arm once more and squeezed gently.

After that I turned and walked out of the kitchen. Maybe the movie Sheila was watching would be a good one. If it wasn't I could always spend

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time replaying my afternoon of carnal delight with Rhonie McDavid through my head.

Chapter 43

Ollie called Tuesday morning at eight.

“Grapevine say Innes Redbone is puttin’ a large price on your head, boy,” Ollie said in a humorous tone. “Seems that he blame you for the loss of some of his merchandise over the weekend. Man ain’t happy at all.”

“Imagine that,” I said, sitting on the living room sofa with my head back, eyes half closed. “How much is the bounty?”

“Fifty large,” Ollie said.

“*Fifty?*” I said in mocking dismay. “Is that all, a lousy fifty thousand bucks? I’m insulted!”

Ollie chuckled down the line.

“Yeah,” he said. “I be embarrassed for you too, man. Somebody ace yo’ ass for such a pitiful amount.”

“You hear anything else about his intentions toward my client?” I said.

“He still want to get ahold of her. Dead if necessary, but he really want her alive. Make her that example for the rest of the girls. I also been gettin’ rumblings about Innes taking some heat from some of the other bosses beneath him. They messin’ with him ‘bout how he not able to keep his house in order. ‘*Specially* his *hos..*”

“Swell,” I said. “Means he’ll be even more determined to come after Nina.”

“And you,” Ollie said. “You really embarrassed him, Derrick. My hearing is that Nestor been chomping at the bit to go out on the streets after you *hissself*, but Innes holding him back for now.”

“Why do you suppose that is?” I said. “I mean Nestor is supposed to be the chief enforcer, Innes’ right hand man. Why isn’t he out leading the fight?”

“Been thinking about that too,” Ollie said. “And why not Frankie? Best I can figure is that Innes know if he send Nestor you goin’ kill the fool.

Nestor a bully and a lot of people afraid of him. You ain't. I don't think Innes willin' to risk losing Nestor over this. At least not yet. And as for Frankie, I don't know. He know the little fella good, real good. He might be able to take you. But then again, you might take him. That happen then he really do lose face."

"Maybe," I said. "But sooner or later he's gonna have to send Nestor."

"Probably," Ollie said. "And you kill him. Let me know, I'd love to be there for that. Maybe pop the fucker myself."

"I'll keep it in mind. For now we're just laying low. I talked to the person who arranged this safehouse and he said I can use it for at least another week so we won't have to move. As long as we keep Nina inside and the number of people who know where we are to a bare minimum, the location should remain secure for a while longer."

"Possibly," Ollie said. "But you know Innes got a lot of eyes and ears, and he real determined. You still need to be on the look out."

"Always am, my friend," I told him. "Always am."

"She give you anything yet?" Ollie said, suddenly changing the subject. "On what she been holding back?"

I shook my head.

"Nope. But last night she came close. It's eating at her, and maybe that's a good thing. Maybe she'll be ready to tell me before long."

"That *might* be a good thing," Ollie said drearily. "Be good to know exactly why it is you riskin' yo' ass. Beside the fact she got nice long legs and an ass you could bounce a dick on all night long."

The suddenness of that latter remark caught me so off guard that I had to laugh; and it took nearly a minute before I had control once more.

"Good one, Ollie," I said, still chuckling. "And yeah, you're right on that score. Not the ass and legs thing, I mean about... never mind. I'll keep you posted."

"Good," he said. "And I'll do the same if I hear anything else out of Innes' camp 'bout you or the girl. I'll also see if I hear 'bout any other targets you can hit if you need to send any other messages to that fat fool."

"Thanks, Ollie," I said. "I appreciate it."

"No problem," he said. "Talk at you later."

Extraction

He hung up and I put my cell phone back on the coffee table next to the Benelli shotgun.

I stood up and stretched my back, thinking about the possibility of breakfast. Plenty of stuff left to concoct something good.

A few minutes later I was still considering the possibilities when my cell phone rang again. The ring-tone was specific to one person so I knew who it was without looking at the caller ID.

This should be interesting, I thought, pressing the ANSWER button.

Chapter 44

Paige Palmer had been at the Homewood City Jail completing a prisoner transfer when she called me. She said she had something for me and wanted to meet. Thinking about the location of the Homewood Jail gave me an idea, seeing as how I had already been thinking about breakfast. So I told Sheila I had to leave for a while and then went out to the garage and got into my car.

Morning traffic was still heavy on the interstates and there were at least two accidents between Pleasant Grove and Homewood. It took me until nearly eight forty-five to reach the *Waffle House* on Oxmoor Road where I had told Paige I'd meet her.

When I went in I found Paige at a table on the right side of the restaurant near the side doors. She waved to me, sipping a cup of coffee. I went over and sat down opposite her. She looked a little tired and not in the best of moods.

"Morning, Derrick," she said.

"Hi, Paige," I said, staring at her as she sipped more coffee.

"Glad you suggested this," she said, glancing around. "Didn't realize how hungry I was till I walked in. And I can always use coffee. Been up for a while handling some housekeeping details on a case we've been working on with Homewood. Skipped breakfast."

I nodded, glancing around and seeing a waitress. I caught her eye and she nodded, pouring coffee into the cup of a customer at a nearby table. She came over to our table next, refilled Paige's cup, and asked if I wanted coffee. I told her no and asked for water. She smiled and said she'd bring it right back.

Turning back to Paige, I saw that there was a green file folder on the table next to her left arm. She was reading through her menu now and I picked up the one in front of me and did the same. When the waitress came back with my water we were ready to order. Paige wanted waffles and strawberries with bacon on the side, and, naturally, more coffee. I ordered steak

Extraction

and scrambled eggs with wheat toast and cranberry juice. The waitress took our menus and then went to put in our orders.

Paige and I sat staring across at one another.

"So I take it nobody has tried to kill you in the past few days?" she said, folding her hands on top of the file folder. "Or your client?"

I nodded.

"So far so good," I said.

Paige shook her head, a small sad smile on her face.

"I guess it's good to keep your sense of humor about things," she said. "You know I hear Innes Redbone has a price on your head. Fifty grand."

"Ollie told me about that right before you called," I told her.

"And that doesn't bother you, does it?"

"Not really. People have tried before."

"But you know the kind of man Innes Redbone is, Derrick. The money he has, the thugs on his payroll. Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money. It'll bring out the crazies."

"So I'll just have to be more careful for a while," I said in a tone that I hoped would placate her at least a little.

Paige sighed and shook her head again, staring briefly out the window to her left before looking at me once more.

"I understand several abandoned buildings that Redbone was using to store drugs and weapons in North Birmingham got torched over the weekend. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you, Derrick?"

I stared directly into her eyes when I answered, never blinking.

"Absolutely not," I said. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Not anyone that mattered," she responded. "Seems like somebody might be trying to move in on Innes' territory. Or perhaps sending him a message that he is not without vulnerabilities."

"Always a possibility I suppose," I responded. "Being the top crime boss in the city does tend to make you the target of jealous competitors."

"*Stop it!*" Paige snapped suddenly, leaning forward. "Just stop it. I'm not talking to you like a cop now, Derrick. This is Paige, your friend. I don't care about Redbone losing his shit. Far as I'm concerned you could burn down everything he owned, and kill all of his thugs. I wouldn't give a fuck and neither would any other cop I know. But I do care about you getting

yourself hurt, maybe killed. Innes Redbone is a brutal man, Derrick, and he is capable of anything. He's got the money and the muscle. You're just making him madder, and for what, this high-class *whore*?"

The waitress came back at that moment with our meals and we paused until she set everything out, then refilled Paige's coffee. She asked if we needed anything else and we told her no so she left. Paige picked up her knife and fork and started in on her breakfast, not looking at me. I was hungry too so I decided to do the same. The steak had been prepared just as I liked it, medium rare, and it was good. The eggs were a little runny but I could eat them.

Ten minutes went by and Paige pushed her plate aside, wiping her mouth with a napkin. She looked over at me as she finished chewing and swallowed.

"I got what you wanted regarding your client," she said, picking up the file folder and handing it across to me.

I put down my knife and fork and wiped my hands and mouth on my napkin, then took the folder, still chewing. I pushed my plate out of the way and set the folder down on the table in front of me, opening it.

What I was looking at was the arrest report for one Nina Loretta Neetor. It was quite extensive, going back a dozen years to when she was in college, some in Birmingham and the surrounding municipalities, a couple up in Memphis, three in Atlanta, and two in the Fort Lauderdale-Miami area. All were for the same offense. Prostitution, sometimes dressed up with fancier terms such as *pandering* or *solicitation*. But in essence the same thing. Thirteen in total. No convictions though. Some fines paid here and there. It was nothing new, I had seen all of this a couple years back when Paige had done the initial investigation on Nina for me in regards to Lionel Grayson. I skimmed it and then moved on to a background history report that was in the folder behind the rap sheet.

I read for twenty minutes and once during this time our waitress came over to check on us but Paige told her we were fine. I didn't bother looking up because I was rather engrossed in the personal life of my client, although I couldn't tell exactly why. There was nothing really remarkable about it; a life like so many others. Parents divorced when she was young, father left her life never to return. Mother struggled to raise her, did the best

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she could. The girl was smart, got a job herself when she was old enough, eventually managed to get into college, despite the hardships. Graduated from the University of Montevallo with a degree in marketing—and was already working as a call-girl even then.

I paused on page twelve and went back to page eleven. Then I went back and consulted the rap sheet. Something was bothering me in the chronology. Back at page twelve again.

When I looked up Paige was staring at me, her elbows on the table, her hands folded together with her chin resting on top of them.

“I was wondering if you’d catch that,” she said with a half smile.

I smiled too.

“Yeah,” I said. “Almost a year missing in her life right at the end of college. Where was she?”

Paige continued to stare at me for a long moment and then took a breath.

“Page eighteen,” she said, then picked up her coffee cup and drained it, signaling the waitress for a refill.

I flipped through the pages until I came to number eighteen and began reading from the top. By the middle of paragraph two I had found it. I read all the way through to page twenty and then looked up at Paige once more.

“That’s her secret,” she said to me. “That’s what she’s been keeping from you and everybody else. And to be honest, I can understand why.”

“Well I can’t,” I said, irritation rising in my voice. “I mean for chris-sake, I’m protecting her life and the life of her mother. You’d think she’d know she could trust me. Especially after what happened at her place last week.”

Paige shook her head and put her now half-empty cup back on the table.

“This is something that she has tried to keep under wraps for a long time, Derrick. Years in fact. Something she is desperate to hang on to and protect. It’s a mother’s instinct. Something that I fully understand, being a mother of four myself.”

I shook my head once more and went back to the file.

After finishing the report I closed the folder and picked up my knife and fork, pulling my plate back in front of me and finishing my breakfast. Our waitress came back and cleared our plates and asked if we wanted anything else. I said no and told her to bring the check.

“What are you going to do now, Derrick?” Paige asked, once again leaning forward on the table.

“Good question,” I told her. “I need to talk to Nina, let her know that I know what her secret is. I suppose, now that I think about it, I can understand why she kept this to herself. If Mya Brown or any of the others knew about it they would certainly use it against her. Especially now. But we need to talk and see about some sort of resolution. She can’t stay in Birmingham, that’s for sure. And with this new complication things just became a lot harder, but not impossible. I’ll let her know that and...”

The glass to my right started to shatter and in the background I could hear the distinctive sound of handgun fire.

Years of training and experience have honed my reflexes to the point of immediate action in response to an attack. So while Paige was recoiling and looking toward the breaking glass, I was leaping over the table and taking her down to the floor with me, rolling her onto her back as I shielded her body with my own.

More shots rang out and more glass broke and all around us people were screaming and scrambling for cover themselves.

Outside there was the sound of running feet and unintelligible shouts.

They were coming...

Chapter 45

As soon as the shooting stopped I reached down to my right side and drew my G-30, raising my head toward the side doors and seeing two young black men wearing oversized athletic jackets and baggy pants coming through, each with semiautomatic pistols in their hands.

I pushed up, still covering Paige with my body, and fired two shots, striking the one in the lead and he stumbled backwards into the other one. This gave me a chance to get into a low crouch and take my weapon in a firm two handed grip. By this time the other shooter had stepped over his friend and was coming inside the restaurant once more, crouching as well, but not low enough. I shot him twice in the chest and before he even started to fall, out of the corner of my right eye, I could see a third gunny outside the broken window by what had been our table.

My head and weapon snapped in that direction and I fired twice and the shooter shuddered under the heavy impacts of the forty-five caliber hollow-points, stumbling back and dropping to the ground, his eyes wide in shock.

Carefully I moved over to the table, glancing toward the front of the restaurant, seeing all the other customers down on the floor, cowering in corners, some crying, a few children screaming. Paige was up on her knees now and her G-19 9mm was in her right hand.

"The *fuck* is this?" she grimaced, scanning the scene. "Fans of yours or mine?"

I looked back at her and saw a small smile on her grim face. It made me smile too, and then her eyes became hard and she pointed her weapon forward, squeezing the trigger twice. As soon as she fired Paige fell back and yelled.

I spun around and saw one hostile down near the front and another coming around the corner. I shot him in the chest and stood up, dropping the

nearly empty magazine from my Glock and slipping in a fresh one from the holder on the left side of my belt behind my cell phone carrier.

I stepped over to Paige, kneeling down but still keeping an eye out for more hostiles. She was on her side, holding her right arm. I could see blood. *Shit!*

“Paige,” I said. “Are you hit?”

She nodded, and groaned.

“Fuck this hurts like a mother fucker!” she exclaimed.

More shots rang out and I leaned over to cover her body. The wall on the other side of me began to pock with bullet holes. Someone else was out in the side parking lot firing in.

I told Paige to hang on and then stood and ran for the side doors, quickly jumping over the bodies of the first two shooters that I had taken out. I kicked the double glass doors open and dove out into the parking lot, rolling behind a green Chevy a few feet away. Wasting no time, I came back to my feet and moved toward the back of the Chevy, stopping and glancing around the back bumper.

About fifteen feet away I could see another athletic jacket wearing young black man with a pistol in his hands. He was crouched low at the back of another car and apparently looking for me. Unfortunately for him, however, at the moment he was looking in the wrong direction.

I took a breath and fell down to the ground, aiming my weapon at the shooter around the back of the Chevy. He turned, too late, and I shot him right between his small dark eyes, quickly following up with a double-tap to the chest before he fell backwards on the pavement.

I rolled over and then came to my feet, crouching once more, my weapon held in the classic Weaver style. After a few moments there was no other movement and I started to breathe again; but I did not relax.

Suddenly I heard sirens close by.

I took another breath, turned, and went back inside the restaurant.

Paige was trying to sit up and another customer had come over to help. I knelt down behind her and put a hand on her back.

“I’ve got you, Paige,” I said as soothingly as possible. “I got you. Help’s on the way.

Extraction

“Oh fuck me, Derrick,” she groaned painfully. “Been so long since I got shot I had forgotten how unpleasant it was.”

Her back was to my chest now and I gently massaged the left side of her face with my fingers, resting my chin on top of her head.

“Soon you’ll be pumped full of drugs and you won’t be feeling a thing, love,” I told her.

She laughed and it caused her great pain. I continued to hold onto her and a couple minutes later the place was filled with uniformed officers from the Homewood Police Department, all of them with their weapons drawn. I had already set mine down on the floor with Paige’s and had her badge and ID held up where the officers could see it.

“This woman is a cop!” I shouted. “She’s hurt and needs help.”

One of the uniforms came and knelt down in front of Paige and had a look at her arm, and then he took his radio mike from his epaulet and called for paramedics.

The officer was again examining Paige’s arm and I was still holding her when I noticed another officer come around the corner, tall, slender, a neatly clipped blond mustache, perfect bearing. On the sleeves of his dark blue long sleeve uniform shirt were the chevrons of a senior corporal.

A familiar face.

The officer saw me and the recognition was immediate. He holstered his departmental-issue SIG-Sauer 9mm pistol and walked over.

Chapter 46

Paige's wound didn't appear to be as serious as feared once the paramedics got her jacket off and looked at it. They didn't think an artery had been hit but there was a lot of blood loss and she needed to be transported to UAB Hospital as soon as possible for a thorough examination. When the ambulance pulled out with her in back there was a two police car escort leading the way.

None of the opposition had survived. A total of six dead and only minor cuts and bruises for the bystanders. They were still shaken up when the cops started taking statements, but they'd probably all be okay in a few hours and rushing off to tell their stories to the gaggle of reporters who were already gathering outside the restaurant behind the police lines.

I was still in back near where Paige and I had been sitting, some crime scene officers taking measurements and snapping pictures, coroner's assistants standing by waiting to get word that they could remove the bodies.

Senior Corporal Brian Williams stood with his long arms folded across his muscular chest, staring down at me from a height of six feet three inches, listening as I finished explaining what had happened.

"That's about it," I said. "Paige and I were actually about to get up and leave when this all started. The waitress was bringing the check, then glass started breaking."

Brian nodded, glancing around at the crime scene people.

"Yeah, that's pretty much what the other witnesses say. Some of them saw the two cars pull into the lot about five minutes before the shooting started. There are cameras in the parking lot and we'll be looking at the tapes. These guys are all bangers. Or were. After you again, were they?"

I stared at him for a few moments, remembering the last time we had met under similar circumstances. When someone had tried to shoot me in the parking lot of my apartment complex. One of the times that had happened.

Extraction

"I've been working on something," I said tentatively.

Brian shook his head.

"Derrick, you do seem to attract trouble, my friend. I heard about that thing out on 280 a week ago. And the incident at the nursing home on Bessemer Superhighway. Heard you showed up on the scene after that one went down. Now this. I get the feeling somebody really does not like you, Mr. Olin."

I smiled.

"An understatement," I said. "And Paige got hurt in the process."

He nodded once more.

"But she'll be alright," he said. "Doesn't look too serious. And the shooters were after you. Damn, boy. Six bad guys and you managed to get 'em all without a mark on you. *Unfuckingbelievable.*"

"Actually Paige got one," I reminded him. "Guy who shot her. They fired at the same time, only she was a better shot."

The Homewood officer nodded.

"Well I should hope so, her being a cop and all."

"Yeah," I said. "Look, Brian, I want to go check on Paige and then I have some place I need to be. How much longer you need me to stay?"

He glanced around again, didn't see who he was looking for, and turned back to me.

"I need to make sure the lead investigator has everything she needs before I release you, but I don't see her right now. Just hang on a minute and I'll go look for her, okay?"

I nodded and he turned and walked back toward the front of the restaurant, carefully stepping over bodies and spent casings and broken glass. The place was a fucking mess.

I leaned against the wall out of the way and checked the inside pocket of my jacket, feeling the folded up file-folder that Paige had given to me, the weight of it heavy for more reasons than one.

Nina and I had to talk, and the sooner the better. No more secrets. This had to end in a hurry. Too many people were at risk now and I did not intend to let stuff like this keep happening.

It was also a possibility that Innes Redbone was going to need another message delivered to him, this one much more direct than the last. I'd

have to give that some thought, maybe consult with Ollie again. He had a knack for such things.

But first things first, and that meant I needed to get out of the Waffle House.

Glancing out the broken side windows I noticed several local news vans, one of them from Channel 42. A brief image of Rhonie McDavid in naked repose on the king-sized bed in a Marriott hotel room in Trussville flashed through my mind and made me smile. Right now I wished that I was back in that hotel room with her again.

I had to put that and all other thoughts like it out of my mind for the time being. Concentrate on the task at hand.

Still, the memories persisted, and I couldn't help but smile.

Brian Williams was signaling for me from the front of the restaurant. I nodded and carefully stepped over a body and then some crime scene markers, and went to join the senior corporal and the lead investigator in charge of the scene.

Chapter 47

Paige only required some minor surgery and it was conducted under local anesthetic, which meant she was fairly lucid just a short time afterwards. When I arrived at the hospital there were at least thirty cops there, most from Birmingham PD. I recognized some of them, including a sergeant from the Criminal Intelligence Unit. The reception I received from the *thin blue line* was not exactly warm, but on the plus side no one shot at me.

Paige was in a private room by the time I saw her, a little groggy but otherwise okay. She managed a smile when I came in, but it was quickly replaced by a grimace.

The nurse told me I couldn't stay long and I told her I wouldn't, then went over and stood beside the bed. Paige looked up at me.

"I'm seriously gonna have to rethink the next time you ask me out to breakfast," Paige said.

I smiled a little.

"Yeah, that might be smart."

"You look alright," she said, her eyes fluttering. "Guess you were faster than I. Or luckier. We got 'em all?"

"Yeah," I told her. "We got them all. Look, Paige, I'm..."

She held up the hand of her uninjured arm and focused hard on me, the effort obvious.

"Don't say it, Derrick. Just don't say it. I know you didn't want this to happen. And to be honest, it's Innes Redbone's fault and not yours. Believe me, my guys are going to be working extra hard to pin this one to him. Maybe me getting shot wasn't such a bad thing. Might be just what we need to finally nail that fucker once and for all. But for right now I want you to go back to wherever you've been hiding your client and stay there. It's real hot on the streets for you right now. I don't know how they found you, but I get the feeling the order is shoot on sight when it comes to you."

I nodded, taking her raised hand, looking over at her right arm immobilized in a cast, suddenly feeling a deep coldness within the pit of my stomach; and a rising fury.

“Probably wasn’t smart picking a restaurant in Homewood,” I said. “I live there and they know that. Probably been scouring the city hoping I’d pop up. When I did word got to somebody and the shooters came calling. My slip-up.”

“And you can’t make anymore, Derrick,” Paige told me, some of the strength fading from her. “You been too lucky too many times on this.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m going to leave now.”

She had trouble focusing her eyes and finally gave up, closing them, her hand in mine going limp.

“You gonna talk to her about what I found?” Paige said in a whisper, sweat beads breaking out on her forehead.

“Go to sleep, Paige, rest. I heard one of the supervisors say that somebody was gonna go find all of your boys and let them know you’re alright. They’ll probably be here when you wake up. Don’t you worry, just rest.”

I put her hand back down on the bed then leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead. She felt a little feverish. For a few more moments I stood staring down at Paige Palmer and let the rage wash over me. Then I turned and found the nurse staring at me. When she saw my face hers suddenly showed fear.

I barely saw her as I walked out of the room and back down the corridor filled with police officers, all of whom didn’t seem to hold me in very high regard right now.

Couldn’t say I really blamed them.

Chapter 48

I walked in through the garage entrance of the Cypress Lane safehouse a little after two p.m. Sheila was in the living room watching an old episode of *Law & Order* on cable with the sound muted. She glanced up at me when I came in. I had called her after the shooting at the Waffle House so she knew what had happened, but I asked her not to share it with Nina.

“You alright?” she said.

I nodded.

“I’m fine,” I said without inflection. “Where is our client?”

“Upstairs in her room as of a few minutes ago when I checked.”

I nodded.

“Thanks. I’m going up to talk to her.”

Sheila nodded and turned her attention back to the TV in the corner. I pulled off my jacket and dropped it on the chair to the right of the stairs, ascending to the next level with little effort, pausing on the upper landing and clearing my mind, making sure I had myself under control before proceeding. I had taken the folder Paige had given me from the inside pocket of my jacket before leaving it downstairs. It was in my left hand and I tapped it against my thigh as I turned and walked down the hallway to Nina’s room.

The door was closed and I knocked twice, making sure not to pound. Nina called out and told me to enter, probably thinking I was Sheila.

I turned the knob and pushed the door open, seeing my client lying in the middle of the bed wearing jeans and a sweater and blue socks. She was curled in the fetal position with a book on the bed beside her. When she realized it was me she closed the book and sat up, smiling.

“Well hi, stranger,” she said cheerfully. “Thought you had abandoned me, you’ve been gone so long.”

I closed the door behind me and moved over to the dresser against the front wall across from the bed, leaning my butt against it, the folder still in

my left hand. Nina's expression changed suddenly when she realized mine was not the most inviting.

"What is it, Derrick, you look... I don't know what you look like. Empty maybe, hard. Did something happen? Is that why you've been gone so long?"

I continued staring at her for a long time, and after a while I got the feeling that my anger was under control enough for me to speak without clinching my teeth.

"I had to go meet with a friend of mine from Birmingham PD," I said in an even voice. "You remember the detective I told you about from the Criminal Intelligence Unit? Paige Palmer?"

Nina nodded.

"Yeah. Did she tell you something that could help out with my situation?"

I shook my head.

"Not really," I told her. "Actually the information I had her collect was not about Innes Redbone or anyone in his organization. It was about you."

Suddenly Nina's eyes became blue ice chips and she stood up from the bed, hands flat against her sides, facing me fully.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "You had her checking me out, why?"

"Because you've been lying to me, Nina," I said flatly. "Or at the very least holding back something significant and I wanted to know what it was. Paige found it. But before we get into that let me tell you why it took so long for me to get back here. Six shooters ambushed us while we were having breakfast at a restaurant in Homewood. Innes' people no doubt. Seems he has become very upset with me for preventing him from getting to you. There is currently a fifty thousand dollar bounty on my head. As you can see, the six shooters failed. All of them are dead now. A lot of people came very close to getting killed this morning, Nina, they were lucky. My friend Paige was not so lucky. She's in the hospital now, lost a lot of blood."

Nina's mouth dropped and her eyes softened.

"Derrick, I'm so sorry. I..."

I held up my right hand.

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“Don’t say it,” I told her. “Just don’t. Luckily she’s going to be fine. But she just as easily could have been killed as well. That would have been very bad for a lot of people. As it stands it’s going to be very bad for some of those people anyhow. But right now you and I are not going to talk about that. What we’re going to talk about is what’s in this folder. Specifically what’s on page eighteen of the report in back of your arrest record.”

I tossed the folder on the bed and Nina stood stock-still, her eyes never leaving mine. She was trembling slightly and I wasn’t sure if she was acting or for real. Probably for real but at the moment I didn’t actually care. I was supposed to keep her alive, not be her nursemaid. Besides, usually when clients lied to me I quit the job, but I was still here. At least for the moment. That would have to be enough for her.

Nina wiped a single tear from her left eye and then sat back down on the bed, taking a deep breath and opening the folder. She paused briefly when she saw the copy of her arrest report, then pushed it aside and picked up the other report, turning the pages slowly, in no apparent hurry to get to page eighteen.

I suspect there was no real reason for her to even read the page. It only contained information that she already knew. However, she was probably going to read it just to confirm that I knew everything, maybe hoping I did not.

Finally she was at the page in question, and slowly, almost painfully, her eyes moved over every typed word.

I stood cold, empty, and waiting.

Chapter 49

It was an old story, and not a terribly exciting one. Unremarkable really.

During the latter part of her senior year at the University of Montevallo Nina Neetor found herself pregnant. An occupational hazard in her profession, even though she always insisted that her clients and boyfriends alike use condoms. But there are never any one hundred percent guarantees in life; at least not honest ones.

Her first thought had been to end the pregnancy as quickly as possible because the last thing she needed at that stage in her life was a child; and how would she explain it? The father could quite literally be any one of a couple dozen men; conservatively. Nina had been very popular even back in her college years. No, there was no way she could see that she could have the baby and raise it herself.

But then her mother had found out she was pregnant the day before she was scheduled to go to a clinic on Birmingham's south side for an abortion. Gloria Sandborne was a very religious woman and believed in the sanctity of life above all else. She told her daughter that if she aborted her grandchild she would never forgive her or speak to her again. This was something the 22 year old Nina could not bear because for all of her life Gloria had been her only family, the one who had raised and protected her and looked after her. If she lost her she would truly be all alone. But she couldn't be a mother either; she just could not raise a child herself.

And that is when Gloria came up with a solution. She and Nina would go away for a while until after the baby was born, and after that Gloria would quietly adopt and raise the child, freeing Nina to do whatever she would with her life, but knowing that her offspring would be raised and loved and taken care of. And so with no other good options, Nina had reluctantly agreed to do as her mother suggested.

The baby was a boy, born healthy via a midwife in a small South Alabama town, and Gloria Sandborne took immediate custody, although exten-

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sive research revealed that she had never legally and officially adopted the child. Shortly after the birth, Gloria and the boy moved to Tuscaloosa where Gloria had some land that had been left to her by her father, along with a small house. Nina went back to Birmingham and soon found herself in the escort business full-time. She earned a lot of money and managed to send a good bit of it to her mother to take care of her child, although she rarely went down to see him or her mother.

Over the next few years Nina moved around but she still kept in touch with her mother and did what she could to provide assistance for her son, always taking care to make sure no one from her professional life knew anything about her personal life, and vice-versa. This arrangement worked out well for the first seven years of the boy's life, but then it all changed when Gloria suffered her first stroke.

Nina was living in South Florida at the time and when word reached her she rushed back to Alabama. The doctors told her that Gloria had been lucky, the stroke was mild. With proper care and therapy she could make a full recovery. The only problem was it would take time, and this meant she could not care for her grandson.

Nina knew even better at this point in her life that she was no mother and didn't even pretend she could take on the responsibility herself. Luckily her escort work had earned her a great deal of money and she had wisely invested much of it according to the suggestions of a few of her more fiscally sound clients. So she hired a full-time nanny for her son and a full-time nurse for her mother until Gloria could get back on her feet. This took about a year, and while the recovery was going on Nina had moved back to Birmingham and taken up her trade there. This was around the time that she met Reese Tamblyn and their working relationship and personal friendship began. Even though they did eventually become very close, Nina never told Reese about her son, still preferring to keep that part of her life a secret.

Gloria Sandborne remained in relative good health for about another year, but then she had another stroke, and this one was more serious. The doctors told Nina that her prognosis for recovery was not so good and that she would never be her former vital self. More care would be required and she would not be able to look after her grandson anymore.

This news devastated Nina for a number of reasons, but foremost in her mind was the need to take care of her mother, and to see to it that her son was looked after; just not by her. Taking care of Gloria was easier, it only required money, and a lot of it.

Andrew Sandborne was another matter altogether. He was nine at this time and growing into manhood much too fast, and without any real adult influences on him other than Gloria and a few teachers who seemed to take the time with him. But Gloria's time had passed, and the boy needed more care himself. Even though she had never really been there for him, Nina did love Andrew and wanted to do what was right for him. Unfortunately this did not include raising him herself.

Nina worried over her situation for several weeks and at one point considered asking Reese Tamblin for help. However, as it happened at the time, Reese was out of town with one of her clients. But there was another woman that Nina had come to trust, a fellow escort and call-girl by the name of Tami Kinkade. Tami was a few years older than Nina and Reese and had more experience in the business. She had taught them a lot during their brief association and they had come to look up to her as a kind of mentor. So Nina went to Tami and told her about her problem.

Tami Kinkade had listened to her friend as Nina explained everything, obviously in great distress, then she had put a hand on the younger woman's shoulder and told her about her own life, including the two children she had, neither of whom knew she was their real mother. They were living up in Raleigh, North Carolina with her cousin and her husband being raised as foster children. Tami sent money and even visited from time to time, but never telling the two girls that she was their mother. Tami said her cousin had always wanted children but was unable to conceive, so this was the next best solution. She wasn't sure, but thought it might be possible that her cousin and her husband would be willing to take in a third child, assuming that Nina could arrange similar financial compensation. Nina said she would and Tami made the call. A couple weeks later Andrew Sandborne was in Raleigh...

"Besides my mother and Tami Kinkade I haven't told a soul anywhere that I have a child," Nina said, her eyes red from crying. "I was always too afraid that something would happen to him if I did. Somehow he would

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be used against me. I've been so desperate to protect him, Derrick. That's why I kept this quiet. I know I should have trusted you, but I just couldn't. He's my son, I have to protect him."

I was still leaning against the dresser, my arms crossed over my chest, staring down at my client as she continued to sit on the bed, now Indian-style.

"So why won't you leave, Birmingham?" I asked. "Get your mom out of here, or let her come later when we can move her? You'd be safe, we could look after her. Your son's in Raleigh, he's safe."

She looked at me but said nothing, and in that instant I knew, saw it in her eyes.

"*Shit*," I swore. "He's not in Raleigh anymore, is he?"

Nothing.

I waited.

Finally Nina shook her head.

"Where is he?" I said firmly.

She glanced at the watch on her left wrist before responding.

"He's supposed to be coming in today," she said in a sheepish tone. "On a bus. Tami is supposed to pick him up and I'm going to call her in a little while and make sure he's gotten in."

"You've spoken to her since you've been here?" I said, suddenly alarmed.

She nodded.

"But not on the house phone, Derrick," she assured me. "I know what you said about that. I didn't use my cell either. I have one of those disposables. Always keep one in my purse in case I need it. Tami doesn't have the number and it's blocked."

I relaxed a little. Whoever said blondes were dumb?

"You should have told me this in the beginning, Nina," I said to her. "If you had I could have arranged for your son to be safely brought to you and we could have gotten all three of you some place secure. Now we've got all this, the shootings, the dead bodies. Life would have been much simpler if you had trusted me."

She started to cry again and I felt a little bad, but only a little.

Finally I sighed and went over to sit down next to her on the bed, putting a hand on her trembling shoulder.

“It’s done now,” I told her, my tone just a bit gentler. “We move on from here with the truth and nothing but, okay?”

Nina wiped her eyes and nose with a tissue she’d been clutching for quite a while, then nodded.

“Good,” I said. “First thing to do is you call Tami Kinkade and find out if your son has arrived, and if he hasn’t, find out specifically when he’s supposed to.”

She took several deep breaths and sniffled a few times, then put her feet down on the floor and went to the closet to get her purse. I stood up and stretched my back.

Life might have been much easier for me if I had been a better student in school, and maybe gone to law school or medical school like my mother wanted.

Then again, life down either of those paths hadn’t appealed to me back then and did so even less now.

For better or worse I suppose I was doing exactly what I should be doing.

And I was pretty damn good at it most days, even if I did say so myself.

Chapter 50

I went downstairs to the kitchen to get a glass of water and to give Nina some privacy while she made the call to her friend. The rawness of her emotions was starting to make me surly and I needed to get away from her for a few minutes. Sheila shut off the TV and followed me into the kitchen, leaning against the wall to the right of the entrance as I went over to the refrigerator and got a bottle of water, twisting off the top and taking a deep swallow before turning and facing her.

She looked at me without expression, her dark eyes calm. I took another sip and put the cap back on the bottle, setting it on the table and leaning down with my palms flat on the surface.

“She’s got a kid,” I said. “That’s what she’s been keeping from us.”

Sheila nodded once.

“Kid’s been up in North Carolina with a friend’s family since the mom got sick a few years back, used to be taken care of by her. Nina’s always kept this quiet, only her mom and this other friend knew. She was looking to protect the boy I suppose. Can’t fault her for that I guess. Anyway, she’s been working on trying to get him back down here to Birmingham quietly before she would agree to leave. He’s supposed to be coming in by bus some time this afternoon. She’s got a disposable cell she’s been using to communicate with her friend, a blocked number. She’s calling her right now. Once we know where the kid is we’ll get him and bring him here, then work on getting everybody the fuck out of Dodge.”

Sheila nodded once more.

“Job might be over soon,” I said.

After a pause Sheila nodded yet again.

“But what about you and Innes Redbone?” she said in her calm, quiet way. “He got a bounty on you and he plenty pissed. She might be safe but Innes might not let it go with you.”

I nodded, pushing up and lifting my arms above my head, stretching my back and yawning.

“That’s true,” I said. “And I’ll deal with that after we make sure Nina and her family are safe. There will be some additional heat on Innes now because a cop was shot. That may cool him out. If not, I’ve got one or two ideas on how to handle him.”

The little shooter grinned slightly, nodding almost imperceptibly.

“I’ll just bet you do, sir,” she said.

Before I could respond, Nina Neetor came running into the kitchen, her face the most distressed it had been since I had started working for her, which was saying a lot.

“Derrick!” she shouted, holding the disposable cell phone in her left hand, her eyes imploring me. “I can’t get Tami! She doesn’t answer her home or cell phones! She’s supposed to stay reachable today, Derrick! She knows I’ll be calling. She never goes anywhere without her cell, not even to the bathroom. Something is wrong, Derrick! *Something* is...”

That familiar sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach suddenly returned. I walked around the table quickly and took Nina’s arms and looked directly into her eyes.

“Where does she live?” I said calmly.

“In Hoover,” Nina said in a panic. “She lives in *Hoover*! I’ll get my jacket, we can go...”

She tried to twist away from me but I held her firmly, and Sheila quietly moved to block the doorway behind her.

“No, Nina. Tell me the address. You’re not going. You’re staying here where I know you’ll be safe.”

She shook her head violently and tried to pull free once more, but with effort I managed to hold her in place and forced her to look at me.

“No, Nina!” I said with more firmness. “You are staying here. I know you’re worried about Andrew, and so am I. But I can’t let you put yourself in further danger, and possibly endanger him even more if he’s seen with you. We don’t know anything is wrong. Tami could be having problems with her cell phone and she might not be at home. Maybe she’s gone out to pick your son up now. We don’t know. I’m going to go to her place and find out. You’re not. Now tell me the address.”

Extraction

Nina's eyes were wet with tears and red and she even looked worse than she had that day back in March when I had seen her shortly after the beating, if that was even possible.

She sank against me and I held her up, glancing over at Sheila as she stood impassively, still blocking the exit from the kitchen. Through sobs and anguish Nina managed to tell me the address.

A few moments later I was able to ease her into a chair at the kitchen table. I squeezed her shoulder once and then walked out of the kitchen, Sheila on my heels.

I put my jacket back on and turned to face Sheila.

"Keep her here," I said in a low tone. "And don't let her use the phone anymore. I don't know what's up, but I suspect something not good. I'll call as soon as I know something."

Sheila nodded.

"Yes, sir. But you aren't going alone, are you?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not that dumb, Sheila," I told her. "I'll call Ollie. And I'm going to see if I can get the friend who loaned us this place to come up and keep an eye out. I'll call and let you know if he's coming, so you won't shoot him."

Sheila grinned a little.

"That would be good, sir."

I nodded, turned, and headed out the door that led to the garage, that sinking feeling still in the pit of my gut, and growing larger with each passing second.

Chapter 51

Afternoon traffic was beginning to pick up when I left the Cypress Lane house at ten minutes to four. I knew by the time I got to the interstate it would really get heavy. But there was no help for it, the best way to get to where I was going was to get on 20/59 East and take it to 65 South and get off on Highway 31.

And that is precisely what I did.

While on the move I made three calls. The first to Pete Newhouse and he was still at the range getting ready to call it a day. He agreed to do what I asked and my second call was to Sheila, letting her know that *company* was coming and it was friendly. I gave her his cell number, having already given Pete hers, and then I hung up.

My last call was to Ollie, and much to my surprise, his personal cell phone was answered by someone other than he.

“Hello, Derrick,” said the familiar female voice in a tone that told me she was not pleased to hear my voice. This was Meeka, Ollie’s twenty-nine year old live-in girlfriend and mother of his five year old daughter. Not one of my biggest fans, and I really couldn’t figure out why. Although at the moment I didn’t have time to care. I asked for Ollie and she paused, saying nothing.

A minute later Ollie came on the line and without preamble I told him what was happening. As soon as I finished he asked for the address, which I gave him.

“I’m closer than you,” he said. “If I leave in five minutes I might make it before you. House or apartment or what?”

“Sounds like a house, although I can’t be too sure,” I told him.

“No matter,” Ollie said. “I find out when I get there. Just you and me?”

“Affirmative,” I said. “Sheila’s staying with Nina at the house. Got some backup headed there too. Just in case.”

Extraction

“Gotcha. I’m puttin’ my shoes on now, man. Be leaving it a bit. All *tooled* up.”

“Copy that,” I said. “See you when I see you.”

He hung up without saying good bye and I dropped my cell back into the holder on my left side, switching lanes quickly to get around a slower moving vehicle.

I knew something had happened. I knew it in my gut. And because of that this was going to be one of the longest drives of my life.

Chapter 52

It was four-thirty before I turned off of Highway 31 onto Patton Chapel Road in Hoover. Traffic had thinned out somewhat after I left Interstate 65 but had picked up again right before Patton Chapel. This road went on for another mile before the intersection I was looking for. Colesbury Circle.

I'd already checked the map I keep in the glove compartment and knew I had to take a right and then follow the road around until it circled up to the address Nina had given me. Not exactly a short distance either, but within a few minutes I made my way through the affluent suburb, up a winding hill, and to a point where I could see Ollie's black SUV parked at the curb just ahead of me.

I pulled in behind it and climbed out, walking to the passenger's side and glancing in, or trying to because the windows were heavily tinted. I knocked and got no response. It was a pretty safe bet that he wasn't still in the car.

I turned and glanced at house numbers, finding the one I wanted two down from where I stood. Looking around some more, I didn't see anyone else out and about in the neighborhood. Probably everyone was still trying to make their way in from work or school. Soon this quiet little enclave would come alive with the upper-middle class activity it...

Gunshots.

This was beginning to get old I thought, reaching toward my right side and pulling the G-36—my G-30 was in the custody of the Homewood Police at the moment—from my belt, crouching. Twice in one day.

Of course this time it did not appear that I was the target. No impacts anywhere close to me. More shots though, down the block. Probably coming from Tami Kinkade's house.

Fuck!

I started running, my Glock held low by my right leg.

Extraction

I took the three steps up to the front porch of 1665 Colesbury in one bound and moved over to the right of the screen door. I could see the interior door propped open. The screen was unlocked and I started to pull it open slowly, and then three more gunshots erupted and I heard glass break.

Fuck this, I thought, shoving the screen door all the way open and kicking in the interior door, going in low and quickly moving out of the open space. The front room of the house was a shambles, furniture knocked over, glass broken, the large flat-screen TV in the corner kicked off its stand. And over in the opposite corner a crumpled figure lay on the floor beside an overturned end table and broken lamp. Female, most likely Tami Kinkade.

“Ollie!” I shouted as I crouched by the shattered remains of the glass coffee table in the middle of the room. “You in here?”

After a moment I heard a familiar booming voice.

“Yeah!” Ollie shouted from somewhere outback. “Just cleaning up the trash!”

I continued to crouch and wait, my eyes darting all around the room, going from one point to the next. After what seemed like forever, the tall lean figure that was *Ollie* Oliver filled the entryway on the left, a long barreled .44 magnum revolver casually hanging down by his right leg.

Exhaling the breath I had been holding, I rose up, still keeping my Glock at the ready.

“Two of ‘em in here with the girl when I got here little while ago,” Ollie reported. “Caught ‘em by surprise. They was fuckin’ with her with a knife. Guess they gonna rape her or something. They just two punks. More was here though. They left those two to keep an eye on the girl. Maybe mess her up too for gettin’ involved. They dead now.”

I nodded, turning toward the sofa and going over, kneeling by Tami Kinkade’s body. She was turned on her side and I gently eased her onto her back, immediately confronted with a scene quite similar to the one I had come upon a few weeks back at Reese Tamblyn’s house. No doubt this was what Nina had looked like immediately after her encounter with the john who had assaulted her.

Tami Kinkade had been brutally beaten, to say the least. Both eyes were black, her jaw broken on at least one side, several teeth had been knocked out, her lips were swollen and cut, and there were small knife slits all

across the tops of her shoulders. Beaten and tortured. Sounded like Nestor Cabaña to me.

I checked for a pulse and found a faint one.

“Call 9-11, Ollie,” I said, returning my weapon to my belt. “She’s alive, but barely.”

Ollie took out his cell and made the call.

I leaned down close to Tami Kinkade’s left ear and whispered, asking if she could hear me, telling her who I was and asking if she understood. After maybe a minute her arm moved and touched my knee. Her lips started to move and she appeared to be struggling to talk. I put my ear right up against her destroyed mouth and strained with everything I could to understand her.

I leaned back and Ollie was kneeling beside me.

“What she say?” he asked.

“Barely got it,” I said. “I think she was saying the boy’s coming in on the five-thirty from Raleigh.”

Ollie and I both checked our watches at the same moment.

Thirty-five minutes.

“Cops and medics will be here soon,” I said, standing. “We need to move now.”

“No argument from me,” Ollie said, also standing. “I’m in no rush to talk to the cops anyway.”

After one more quick glance down at Tami Kinkade we turned and started for the front door.

Chapter 53

Birmingham's Greyhound Bus Terminal is set in the middle of 19th Street North in downtown across from Linn Park and between the Birmingham Firefighters' Credit Union and the Alabama Telco Credit Union. Parking is never easy on good days, and the later in the day it is, the more miserable the situation becomes.

This afternoon was no different, but today Ollie and I were not concerned with finding proper parking. I pulled to a stop across the street from the terminal in a NO PARKING ZONE and climbed out. Ollie pulled in behind me and did the same. Traffic was thick in this part of downtown after five p.m., everyone was trying to get out of the area as buses continued to arrive and depart. Ollie and I darted through the traffic and crossed the street at a slow jog, and once we were clear we picked up the pace.

There were two buses coming out of the loading bays around the west side of the terminal and preparing to pull out on to 19th Street. Ollie and I ran around the lead one as it stopped at the intersection and crossed over to the main entrance. There was a uniformed guard standing there smoking a cigarette and looking bored. I went up to him.

"Where do the buses arrive?" I said.

"Out around back, young fella," the old guard said after exhaling a large mouthful of smoke. "Load off to the side there where you saw those two buses coming from. You got somebody comin' in today?"

Ollie and I didn't bother responding, just pushed on into the crowded terminal.

"You got any idea what this boy look like, Derrick?" Ollie said as we started moving through the crowd, glancing all around. "Other than white and twelve?"

"Not a clue," I said. "And because Nina was never all that sure who the father was, we don't know he's *all* white?"

Ollie nodded.

“True. So what we do, just go around looking at all twelve year old boys?”

“We could start by finding out which bus is from Raleigh,” I told him, glancing over at the arrivals board, moving a little closer. “Up at the top, second one. Drop off bay seven, bus number forty-three.”

We looked around some more and saw a sign that gave directions for the drop-off bays with pointing arrows. Ollie took the lead, moving people out of the way none-too gently. A few people looked as if they wanted to say something, but one glance into Ollie’s cold brown eyes gave them pause.

I followed close on his heels and soon we were through the crowds and moving out back. There was an automatic sliding glass door and it opened and we went out onto the bay dock where several others were already waiting, five buses already unloading, another just arriving.

I told Ollie to go right and I went left, whoever found the bus would signal the other.

The first one I came to wasn’t it and neither was the second. The bus that had just pulled in was number forty-three. Suddenly my pulse rose. I turned back to signal Ollie and that’s when I saw Nestor Cabaña.

He was five feet away wearing a long leather coat, dark shades, and no hat. An apparition of total *badness*. At least I’m sure that’s how he saw himself.

His right hand darted under his coat and I rushed him, slamming my left elbow into his solar plexus before he could pull his weapon. Nestor bent over and gasped and I hit him on the back of the neck with my right fist, driving down as hard as I could, impacting against his solid muscle. Still, the big man went down on one knee. I raised my left knee into his face and sent him sprawling backwards.

People were now scrambling to get clear of us and off to the right I saw a heavysset character pull a pistol from his belt and raise it toward me. He fired about a split second after I moved to the left and dove, rolling several times and bumping into some bystanders who were now trying to run for cover.

The shooter crouched his heavy body down as he adjusted his aim and by now I had my G-36 out and coming up on target. Too slow. The shooter pitched back and fell against the concrete wall behind him as Ollie’s

Extraction

magnum boomed once more, a red splotch appearing in the center of the gunman's white shirt.

Nestor Cabaña had recovered enough to get at his pistol and was now on his knees, raising a Beretta 9mm at me. I fired once and hit him in the stomach. The impact forced his shades down off of his eyes and the look of stunned amazement was startling on his ebony face. He took in a breath, glanced down, his hand going to his stomach, and as he touched the material of his gray knit shirt a pool of red erupted from the center.

Once again the chief enforcer looked toward me, his pistol still extended forward in his right hand, then he dropped to his butt on the ground and the weapon clanged down next to him. Now he sat holding his stomach with both hands, blood seeping through his fingers.

I got to my feet and quickly scanned the scene for additional hostiles, then saw Ollie moving close to my left side.

"You see anybody else?" I said.

"Nope," he said, his magnum held down by his right leg. "Don't mean there ain't somebody. I'll keep an eye out, you look for the boy."

I nodded, lowering my weapon to my side. This should be an easy task.

Yes, come on out, young man, don't be afraid of the large black guy with the shaved head and gun. Come on out, Andrew, and identify yourself and let this stranger take you to a woman you don't even think of as your mom.

Simple.

Chapter 54

All the police departments in the Birmingham metropolitan area were getting a little sick of me. During the past couple of weeks their violent crime statistics had increased dramatically over the last quarter and the common factor in each new incident was yours truly. If this continued I might be expelled from the state.

The cops arrived on scene before I found Andrew Sandborne. Lucky for me a detective I knew from Robbery was close by and he responded when the shooting call came in. He vouched for me and after I told him why I was there he and the other officers helped me locate the boy. He had stayed on the bus along with half of the other passengers, hiding in the back, scared out of his mind.

He was alone, told by his foster parents that someone would pick him up in Birmingham and take him to his grandmother. All he had with him was a small suitcase and the clothes on his back. If I had found him earlier I would have recognized him immediately. Andrew Sandborne was the spitting image of his mother, Nina. Same hair and eyes, same frame. He was going to be a very handsome young man. Hopefully he would not make his living as his mother had, but that was not for me to judge.

The cops were reluctant to release him into my custody, and to be honest he wasn't all that thrilled either, but eventually, after a call to a friend of mine with some clout in the DA's Office, the scene supervisor shook his head in disgust and told me to take him and go.

So that's exactly what Ollie and I did.

I had already called Nina and told her we had her son, at which point she dropped the phone and Sheila had come on, telling me that Nina was on the sofa sobbing. I told her I could understand that and hung up.

It was almost nine p.m. when we got to the Cypress Lane house. Pete Newhouse was still there, parked out in the drive in his black Chevy

Extraction

pickup. I thanked him and told him he could go, and then Ollie and I took the boy inside the house.

Nina and Sheila were sitting on the sofa and both stood as soon as we entered, Nina much faster. When she saw her son she ran toward him and took him in her arms, hugging him fiercely and crying, saying his name over and over again. The boy was a little uncertain, but eventually put his arms around his mother and held her as she wept.

Much later mother and son had gone upstairs to talk.

Ollie, Sheila, and I were downstairs in the living room talking. Ollie lounged on the large plush sofa while I took one of the easy chairs across from him. Sheila leaned against the side wall and alternated looking at both of us. Periodically she would excuse herself to go up and check on Nina and the boy and to look outside.

"We can get her and the boy out of here in a day or so," Ollie said. "No problem. The mom be more complicated, but she can be looked after. She got a place to go yet?"

"She had one all along," I told Ollie, sipping from a cup of herbal tea I had prepared. "She was just stalling. She told me everything when I went up with them."

Ollie smiled and drank some of his Sprite.

"Devious woman," he chuckled. "Take care of the old lady too?"

I nodded.

"Be about a couple of days before everything is ready. I think we can keep them safe here and her mom at Fairview till then. After today Innes might come to his senses. There's a lot of heat gonna be on his organization now. With Nestor down on the scene at the bus terminal this leads directly to his door. The cops are already talking to him about this and the thing in Homewood. They'll probably get what happened in Hoover in there too, especially if Tami Kinkade pulls through."

Ollie shook his head.

"Amazing. You gut shot that fool with a forty-five and they think he gonna make it. Fuck. Shoulda shot him in that fucking big head of his, Derrick."

I sighed and finished my tea.

“Yeah,” I said. “But look at it this way, there are long-term consequences to taking a larger caliber bullet in the stomach. Recovery is going to be long and painful. And can you imagine anyone more deserving of long-term pain than Nestor Cabaña?”

Ollie grinned.

“Well, one person,” he said. “Innes Redbone.”

“Touché,” I said.

“And speaking of that fucka,” Ollie said. “You know he ain’t gonna let you skate on this. Too much embarrassment for him. You might get the girl out and safe, but Innes ain’t gonna let this go.”

“I know,” I said quietly. “I know.”

Ollie stared at me in silence for a few minutes. Sheila continued to lean against the wall and stare at the space between us.

“We might have to do somethin’ about that some time,” Ollie said.

I stood up, holding my empty tea cup in both hands.

“I know,” I said, then turned and walked into the kitchen.

Chapter 55

Two nights later, in the dead of night, a private ambulance with special equipment and personnel secretly removed Gloria Sandborne from the Fairview Nursing Home in Midfield. A short time after that the ambulance met up with three other vehicles and the little convoy quietly drove north on Interstate 65 and out of Birmingham, eventually out of Alabama. I accompanied them for the first day until they reached Southern Indiana. Nina told me that from this point on she had made other arrangements.

I nodded.

She smiled for the first time during our journey and put her arms around me, kissing me gently on the lips. That was kind of nice, if platonic.

As a parting gift she handed me a cashier's check for the exact amount my bill should be if I had bothered to calculate it. She had thought of everything. And now she was out.

Good for her.

I went back to Birmingham.

The next afternoon Earl threw a small party in my honor at the club, cooking a special meal and even baking a chocolate cake—his favorite and mine. And as an added treat, all of the hosting staff was present in their skimpy little hosting outfits, Reese Tamblyn most prominent among them. She spent most of the time pressing her very large breasts against me and otherwise touching me in all sorts of inappropriate places. Strange, but somehow I didn't seem mind it all that much.

Maybe I was mellowing with age.

And maybe I wasn't.

Paige was released from the hospital and I went by her place to see her. She said she'd be back to work in another couple of weeks and doing everything in her power to make sure Innes Redbone went down for some of the things we knew he had done to get at Nina Neetor. Nestor Cabaña was going to recover—*unfortunately*—but he was being held in the jail ward at

UAB on an illegal weapon's charge. Not nearly what he should be charged with, but it was a good start. So far he had said nothing about why he had been at the terminal and why he had tried to shoot me. Nobody expected he would.

Paige told me that as soon as she had the full use of both of her arms she expected me to invite her over to my place for dinner and something physical. I told her not to worry, that was definitely on the agenda.

Then there was the matter of Mr. Redbone himself. Ollie had learned that despite all the heat on him he had actually increased the bounty on my head. Now a hundred K. This was not good. For that kind of money people who liked me might start taking runs at me, to say nothing of all the punks out there with guns and no brains.

Mr. Redbone and I needed to talk.

If I had thought Sweet Mya Brown looked hot with her clothes on, seeing her without them had only strengthened that opinion. She was exquisite. Toned, smooth, not a blemish anywhere that I could see, and from where I had been observing her I could see everything.

Of course, there were drawbacks to this because in seeing everything there was to see of Ms. Brown's luscious body, I also got to see everything there was to see of Innes Redbone's horrid spectacle. What was that line at the end of *The Heart of Darkness*? *The horror, the horror!* Indeed!

Innes Redbone had a large house in the middle of the Fountain Heights neighborhood just north of Fountain Heights Park. All brick and surrounded by a twelve foot wrought-iron fence. Guards were positioned out front in a car in the drive and every couple of hours somebody walked the back perimeter. There were no dogs, it was rumored that the fat man was deathly afraid of them. Too bad, it would have made getting inside just a little more difficult.

When I'd entered the house the lower floor was in total darkness. After checking everything out, I quietly made my way upstairs and soon came upon the master bedroom at the far right side. The door had been partially open and from the darkened hallway I could see everything going on in the low-lit room. It would have to be my luck that I picked the night Innes was having sex with his woman. I didn't mind seeing her having sex, but seeing

him in the act was probably going to haunt me for years to come, to say nothing of ruining my sex life.

Sweet Mya Brown climbed off the bed, her large and shapely rump facing the doorway, and I was glad of that. She giggled and told Innes she'd be back in a minute, and then padded off toward another door to what I assumed to be the master bathroom.

The crime boss lay still in the middle of the bed, his flabby body covered in sweat, his breathing erratic. Even from here I could see the self-satisfied smile on his pudgy face. Time to change that.

I stood quietly and stepped into the room, a silenced 1911 Model .45 in my right hand pointing at the impossible-to-miss-target that was his huge, shapeless chest. Redbone did not see me at first, his attention no doubt on the memories of what he and Sweet Mya Brown had just been doing.

I was two feet from him when he finally noticed me, and he choked, his large eyes opening wide.

"If you scream, Innes," I said in a low voice that was bereft of human tone. "I'll kill you. And that very lovely young lady in the bathroom. You understand? Nod your fat head if you do. No need to speak."

The fright was impossible to conceal, but he did manage to nod, very fast.

"Good," I said. "I'm gonna make this brief, then I'll let you get back to your little party here. By the way, I don't like you, but *damn* boy do you have good taste in girlfriends. Anyway, like I said, brief. Cancel the contract, Innes. Nina's gone and it's over. You're still the *Man* in Birmingham despite this. Nobody can challenge you. At least not yet. But you keep pushing this, I'm going to have start pushing back. First I'll wreck your operation, weaken you, make you look like a real fool, and then I'll start to hurt you personally. I don't know if you really care about Mya, but I'll hurt her just because. In the end, I'll come back here, or wherever you end up hiding, and I'll get in. And when I do..."

I pressed the cold tip of the silencer against his temple and his eyes widened again.

"I'll kill you. You understand? Another nod will be sufficient."

He nodded, this time even quicker than the last.

The toilet flushed in the bathroom.

“Guess your lady’s about done,” I whispered. “I’ll be taking my leave, old fellow. Just remember this conversation tomorrow. The next one won’t be nearly as pleasant. Oh, and just a few quick tips. Get some dogs, get an alarm system, and get better trained guards than those boys you got down there now. At least make it a challenge for me if I have to come back. Also one more thing. Eat a fucking salad once in a while, man, you’re a goddamn hippo!”

The bathroom door started to open and I quickly exited the room. I didn’t hear anything more that went on in the bedroom and didn’t need to. My message had been delivered, now all that remained was to see if it was heeded.

Chapter 56

Sweat was flowing freely down from the top of my bald head, running into my eyes, pitching off the tip of my nose, and sliding down my neck.

Rhonie McDavid giggled as a bead hit the spot between her eyes.

“Sorry about that,” I said, leaning down and kissing her on the lips.

“You should be, Mister,” she said playfully. “Getting me all wet and sweaty. *Oh gawd!* Keep doing that.”

“That’s the plan,” I told her, thrusting forward once more, and then again, faster and faster as Rhonie moved beneath me, her breasts bare and unrestrained, bouncing up and down and side to side as I braced on my hands above her.

I came first, but only by a second, and then she did as I continued to move within her.

Afterwards we both lay still, her legs still locked around me, breathless and spent.

“So nobody’s tried to kill you in a few weeks, huh?” Rhonie said a little while later, her head resting in the crook of my left arm.

“Nope,” I said. “Maybe the war is finally over. Or perhaps just this battle.”

She kissed my left nipple and slowly rubbed her left thigh against my abdomen.

“Well I’m glad,” Rhonie said. “It would be really sad if you died before we got to try every sexual position in your arsenal at least once. Maybe twice.”

I chuckled and she bit and sucked on the left side of my chest above the nipple, then my neck.

“That really would be a shame,” I told her, sliding my left hand under her butt and lifting her body on top of mine. “And just so we make sure that doesn’t happen, before you leave here today you’re going to experience at least *five* more.”

Stellen Qxz

Rhonie grinned, her face just an inch from mine.

“God, you’re *hard* again already, Derrick,” she said in amazement.

“But of course,” I told her in a serious tone, both hands cupping her round backside. “Haven’t you heard? Derrick Olin is the *hardest* man in town.”

Rhonie stared down at me for a few seconds and then her face cracked into a huge smile and she could not stop convulsing with laughter.

Well, at least not until I rolled her onto her back and...